



VICTORIAN

ROMANTIC GOTH MYSTERY

CLARA'S DARING DEBUT

A PHILADELPHIA BELLES NOVEL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KIM CLEARY

Clara's Daring Debut

A Philadelphia Belles Novel

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Clara's Daring Debut

First edition, June, 2021

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Cover by Milktee Studios Cover Designs

Proofed by Jen Katemi

Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23

Minnie Romances a Rogue

Also by Kim Cleary

About the Author

“

Father is immovable. He wants to see me engaged to Mr. Henry Norris—the elitist, social climbing, arrogant cad. I can't stand him. But will Father listen? No. I've no intention of marrying the odious man. So, let him make any announcement he likes, there will be no wedding.

Clara's Journal, Friday, July 20, 1884

A chill coursed through Clara's body when she woke. She snuggled into her blankets until the shivering calmed, but she couldn't fall back asleep. Not this Saturday. Debut day. *Her* debut.

Her pulse ratcheted up several notches. It was bad enough she'd let herself be talked into a debut ball at all, but Father's plans to announce her engagement to a man she could not stand would ruin everything. She had no new arguments to try, but she had to make him see reason. She would not marry Henry Norris, and that was the end of it. She pulled on the bell to summon her maid. She didn't really need Edna's help to slip into a simple day robe and ready herself for breakfast, but today of all days, she needed the older woman's company.

A tap on the door came minutes later, and Edna entered within a few seconds. "Do you want a breakfast tray this morning, Miss Clara?"

"Just your help with my hair, you know how useless I am at dressing it myself." Clara climbed from the bed and sat in front of her dressing table. Looking her best couldn't possibly hurt. "I'll go down to breakfast today. Is my father already up?"

"I'm sure Mr. Penrose has risen, and he'll be down for breakfast at eight am on the dot as usual." Edna grinned in the mirror as she unraveled the thick braid hanging at Clara's back. "In the breakfast room this morning as it's just the two of you."

"Of course, he will." Clara gave a slight smile back. At least the

breakfast room was a more intimate setting than the formal dining room where they ate whenever they had guests. "My debut ball tonight will not interfere with his schedule." Not even her mother's death three years ago had interfered with his routine. Hard to imagine that something as mundane as her debut, and the engagement announcement he wanted to foist onto her, would make a difference. With closed eyes, she massaged her temples.

How could he treat the rest of her life as a business transaction?

"Are you planning on one last effort to change his mind, Miss?"

"I have to, Edna." Clara let out a breathy sigh. Her voice crackled with emotion. "If I let myself dwell on the future, my body is an empty shell. I feel hollowed out. How can I face a lifetime with a man I don't care for? A man who has made it obvious he doesn't care much for me?" No, he made it clear all she was to him was a ticket into the exclusive Philadelphia Club.

Edna squeezed her shoulder gently. "You will think of something, Miss; you always do."

That may have been true up until now. But she rather feared she'd met her match in her father's determination to see her married to the Right Honorable Henry pompous-rat Norris.

Thankfully her father sat alone in the breakfast room when Clara joined him. She helped herself to eggs and toast and sat in her usual place.

"Father." She waited for him to lower the newspaper he was reading.

He lifted his brow and glanced at her. "You will not change my mind, Clara."

Was she so predictable? Drat him for expecting her to challenge him again. She sipped at her tea and tried to calm her nerves. "Can we at least postpone the announcement?"

"No, we cannot, the finest of Philadelphian high society are expecting an announcement, and I will not disappoint our esteemed guests. Besides, I doubt Henry would be happy with any delay, nor do I encourage you to ask him." He lay down the paper and took Clara's hand. "I know you are not in love with him, but companionship will come in time."

"I don't even like him, let alone love him." She snatched her hand away. "You obviously know he has a temper. He's arrogant, he doesn't listen to me at all, and there is something about him that gives me the

creeps.”

“Remember your place, Clara. I’m hearing language and sentiment that is inappropriate for a lady of your standing. Gives you the creeps indeed. I don’t know where you hear such language.”

“Father, I’m sure we could find someone better—”

“Not likely.” He laughed as if this was a joke rather than her life and happiness at stake. “My mind is made up. You are now twenty-one. I know you put off your debut due to your dear mother’s passing, but it is past time for you to take your place as a married society woman. I can’t announce your engagement until you make your debut. He is one of the few titled gentlemen, based in Philadelphia, who also has a successful business and considerable wealth.”

“You know I don’t want a title. Besides, it’s only a baronetcy.”

“We have already discussed this very topic. A title will grant you access to the highest echelons of society both here and in Europe.” He lifted his palms to show her the discussion was over. “With his name and wealth, he will keep you safe and secure.”

“Who cares about happiness?” With trembling fingers, Clara spilled tea as she poured herself another cup. She hadn’t really hoped for a different answer, and yet threads of futility wound around her tightening chest.

“Sometimes the paramount husband is one who will do what they know is best for their wife, regardless of what she believes.” He glared at her. “You will marry the Right Honorable Henry Norris, and that is final. We will announce the engagement this evening at the ball as planned. You will thank me when you are enjoying the privileges a life as Lady Norris will bring.”

And there it was in a nutshell; she was supposed to obey her father until he handed her over to a husband she was likewise expected to obey.

She broke eye contact with her father. “I’d rather live in a log cabin with a—”

“That is enough, Clara. I will not hear another word of argument on the matter.”

Clara resisted the temptation to storm from the room. But she couldn’t stop thoughts swirling in her brain. This arrangement went against everything marriage ought to be. Henry Norris was a cold, calculating man who would do anything to grow his wealth, power, and

connections. By marrying Clara, he not only secured a large dowry, but gained access to the exclusive Philadelphia Club thanks to her father descending from one of the old Philadelphia families.

Clara stood gracefully though she felt anything but. "I think I will walk in the gardens for a little while."

Her father waved her away. "Good idea; maybe you will find some calm amongst your mother's roses."

She winced but tried not to think about what her mother would make of this arranged marriage. She and Father were lucky enough to meet, fall in love and have their relationship approved by both sets of parents. Mother wouldn't ignore her contentment, even if she were very selective in considering suitors. Back in her room, she rang for Edna again.

"The pale gray walking dress today, I think," Clara said as soon as Edna entered.

"You have time for a good walk before lunch." Edna laid out undergarments and helped Clara out of her day dress. "I will have everything prepared for you to get ready for this evening's ball by the time you return."

"Not that horrid pale pink monstrosity Henry wants me to wear." It was still in a huge box wrapped in layers of tissue paper. She'd looked at it once, shuddered and tossed it at Edna to put away.

"Didn't he order it specially from Paris?" Edna cocked her brow at Clara.

"I don't care. I'm not wearing it. We both saw how narrow and tight the skirt is. I would barely walk in it, let alone dance. The bustle could hold up a tea tray! If I stood still for too long, someone would mistake me for a card table." Clara folded her arms. "Get the turquoise lace and green chiffon dress ready instead. I haven't had a chance to wear it yet, and it has happy memories for me." Happy memories of a shopping trip in New York with her best friends, Roland and Minnie, and their warm and sympathetic mother.

Edna shook her head, though with a slight curve in her lips. "As you wish."

Edna helped her into the heavily boned gray and white plaid walking dress and piled her hair into a chignon to support the matching post-boy hat. Clara gazed at her reflection in the cheval mirror for several seconds. She looked so normal, despite feeling like she was walking to

her doom.

She wandered through the conservatory at the back of the house trailing her fingertips across the leaves of palms, ferns and orchids. It had been her mother's favorite room, and Clara kept it just the same. She loved the entire sprawling country estate, including the magnificent mansion Father had built when Philadelphia's wealthiest families moved from the overcrowded city to the countryside along the Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line west of the city.

In the garden, she meandered through garden beds filled with dianthus, lilacs, pansies, lilies, geraniums, and hollyhocks, until the delicious scent of roses wafted from the arbor that led into the walled rose garden.

"Miss Clara Penrose!" A man's voice interrupted Clara's thoughts.

She spun around, and her gaze settled on her next-door neighbor and best friend.

"Good morning, Roland." A smile spread across her cheeks. In desperate need of a friendly face, she'd secretly hoped to bump into him or his sister Minnie.

"Are you looking forward to your debut this evening?" He approached and held out his arm for her to take. "It's a lovely morning for a walk."

Arm in arm they entered the rose garden. Clara drew in a deep breath and stopped to smell several large blooms as they walked.

"My mother always said that a rose's fragrance will change with its age, the weather, the season and even from year to year, so it's important to smell as many roses, as often as possible."

"When it came to roses, I know your mother was always right." Roland tugged on her arm lightly to pull her to a stop. "What's wrong?"

"Why nothing, didn't you hear I will be a society lady after tonight?" Clara tried to laugh, but the sound came out strained and gurgled. She couldn't face Roland's inquisitive gaze, so she pretended to be very interested in the forget-me-nots massing and curling around the base of the rose arbor.

"Clara. We've been friends too long for you to lie to me. Please look at me."

She swallowed, her mouth dry, not trusting herself to be able to speak

in anything other than an emotion-laden voice, but she didn't ease her grip on his arm.

He guided her to a sheltered seat. "Let's sit."

Sitting next to him, their thighs and shoulders touching, his hands gently enveloping her own, she gave up the fight and let herself collapse against his shoulder. He rubbed gentle circles at her inner wrist, the touch calming her even more than the delicious fragrance surrounding them.

"Mother always said the fragrance of roses has the magical ability to calm and raise our spirits at the same time."

"Then let the magic work." Roland kissed the top of her head, the softest touch, in the way a protective older brother might, just like he had so often in the past.

Henry barely acknowledged her, let alone comforted her like this. Would he suddenly change his behavior toward her after they married? If they married. "I don't know what to do." She nibbled at her bottom lip. "Father doesn't want me to tell anyone."

His eyebrows lowered. "I would never encourage you to break a confidence, but you know I will always keep your secrets."

"I do know." She straightened her back and Roland gave her a handkerchief to dab where the tiniest tears moistened the corner of her eyes.

She gazed into the face she knew so well, the face of her oldest and best friend. His eyes the color of faded denim overalls and as deep as the Atlantic Ocean. Henry would take her away to live with him at his modern but boring townhouse in the old city. How could she bear it? He didn't have a garden at all. The thought of never seeing Roland again, never having moments like this, set her pulse racing. Her arms trembled with the effort to hold in a pained groan.

"You are worrying me, little one."

That brought out a laugh. "Not so little anymore."

"You are still little compared to me. Only as high as my shoulders even in your boots." Roland chuckled and the sound helped to ease some of the tension in her neck.

Clara tightened her hands into fists, then released them and sat up straight and tall. Enough wallowing for today. "I'm sorry for the amateur dramatics."

“You of all people do not play games with your emotions, so I know whatever is distressing you is deeply concerning.”

She nodded and gripped Roland’s hand again for strength. “Father insists we announce my engagement to Henry Norris this evening.”

“Engagement.” Roland spat out the word like it offended him. “But you rejected the cad, twice I believe.”

“Father has overruled my choice; in fact, he gives me no choice at all.” A kernel of tenacity lodged in her heart. “He might succeed in announcing the engagement tonight. But if he does, I will find a way to break it. Even if I end up shunned by the whole of society.”

“I will not let that happen.” Roland’s voice fractured. “Even if I have to carry you off in the middle of the night to steal away and elope.”

“That was almost a marriage proposal.” Clara laughed to ease the sudden tension between them.

“It almost was.” He grinned back. “I will look after you, Clara. Always. You can depend on that.”

“I know it and am grateful for it every day.” She squeezed his hands. “I must return before Edna sends out a search party. But I will see you tonight?”

“Of course. I was looking forward to your debut ball, though not so much now I know it’s an engagement party rather than your debut. But I will be there to support you.” He flashed a cheeky smile as he ran a hand through his thick caramel waves. “Perhaps if your dance card is not filled, you will save a waltz for your old friend?”

“I will pencil your name against several waltzes.” The smile that danced across her face was the first real smile of the day.

She excused herself back to the house before her emotions ran wild in front of him again. Her heart pounded as she walked, but she kept her steps slow and measured. Her thoughts turned to the impending engagement. No. Henry Norris could get out of her head and stay out.

An elopement with Roland sounded more acceptable than it should. Imagine it. Her father would be furious. Red-faced and so worked up he would doubtless stutter rather than speak clearly for minutes, perhaps hours. The image brought an entirely inappropriate giggle to her lips.

Roland. Her heart constricted again at the thought of leaving him behind. He’d been her best friend since she was four years old and he

found her poking about in his frog pond. She hadn't considered him for a husband. Truthfully, she hadn't considered anyone for a husband as she planned on leaving marriage for several years. He possessed no title, but he stood to inherit his father's considerable wealth and would no doubt succeed in his law career. He would provide all the privileges and safety her father wanted for her, and he lived right next door.

More importantly, while Henry set her nerves on edge, with Roland she felt safe no matter what hijinks they planned and perpetrated. He made her laugh. Not that her father seemed at all concerned with her feelings, or her happiness. Could she really elope with Roland?

If she could not stop Father trying to arrange an unwanted betrothal, perhaps she could convince him that Roland offered almost all the same privileges with the added bonus of her genuine happiness. He hadn't courted anyone as far as she knew, and couldn't be interested in anyone else or he wouldn't mention elopement, would he? If her father was hell bent on an engagement for her, then Roland was a much better option. She continued her slow walk; with each step she plotted and strategized what she could do to get her father to change his mind.

“

I *HATE* that man. Despise him. Why didn't I think of dearest Roland sooner than this? He promised to look after me, and he always has. He wouldn't have to carry me off in the middle of the night to elope. If this abhorrent engagement to HN goes ahead, I will willingly follow Roland to the ends of the earth. Society, even Father, be damned.

Clara's Journal, Saturday, July 21, 1884

Deep in thought, Clara smacked straight into a hard body as she ambled along the path through the kitchen garden. She stumbled and strong hands grasped her wrists.

“There you are.” Henry stroked his hands up to her shoulders and gripped hard.

He leaned closer and aimed a kiss at her mouth. She stiffened and turned her head and his lips brushed her cheek instead.

He hooked his fingertip under her chin and turned her head to face him. “So shy, dearest?”

She narrowed her gaze at him. “We are not yet engaged let alone wed, and I would thank you to remove your hands from my person.”

He let out a guffaw, but dropped his hands to his sides. “So formal. So cold.” He leaned closer again and his breath drifted across her face. “I will be staying here tonight, in the guest room just three doors along from your bedroom.”

“Your sleeping arrangements are no concern of mine, Mr. Norris.”

His cruel laugh wrapped like a whip around her neck. “I will see you this evening, dearest.”

He walked away with so much cockiness in his step, Clara's skin crawled. She let out a pained sigh. Perhaps, instead of telling Father that Henry gave her a creeping feeling, she should try and explain that

she had an allergic reaction to him.

She blew out a breath. In his current mood he would most likely recommend calamine lotion.

LUNCH PASSED SLOWLY. Her father refused to acknowledge her let alone speak to her. A deep frown marred his face. He was probably still annoyed that she kept arguing with him when he had made it very clear she would marry Henry Norris, and he would announce their engagement that evening.

She ate quietly and excused herself to get ready for the ball. Edna was already in her bedroom when she returned to her room, the bed covered in satin, silk and lace.

“Draw me a bath, Edna. I must start my toilette.” Maybe if she kept busy, the drum of impending doom would stay out of her head.

“Of course, Miss Clara. Would you like any oils in the water today?”

“Lavender. No, rose. Wait, lavender and rose together perhaps?”

Edna chuckled. “Leave it to me, Miss Clara.”

One thing for sure, if she had to marry that horrid man, Edna would go with her. Clara rifled through the garments on her bed. First, the horrid pale pink satin and coarse lace monstrosity from Henry, then the soft silk and chiffon of the turquoise and green dress from New York. Two separate sets of undergarments sat beside the dresses, the corsets incredibly pretty though heavily boned and stiff.

“You will be the belle of the ball in either gown.” Edna returned toweling her hands.

Clara huffed in response.

“Let me pin up your hair so we can keep it dry.” Edna patted the stool in front of Clara’s dressing table. “If you can keep it from getting wet, it will be easier for me to arrange your style for this evening.”

“I don’t suppose I could get away with a dull day dress and my hair in a low chignon?” Clara lifted her eyebrows. “The outfit would better suit my mood.”

“You would embarrass yourself and your father like that?” Edna shook her head.

“You know I wouldn’t.” Clara let out a breathy sigh.

The best and brightest of Philadelphia would attend her debut ball tonight. Invitations had gone out and been accepted by her father’s cohorts and the most influential people in the city. She might be angry with him, but she wouldn’t embarrass him. At least, not tonight.

She slipped into the petal-filled tub and sank into the steaming water. Her heavy limbs felt weighed down rather than floating in the water like she normally enjoyed. There was no escaping the truth, no matter how she got out of this marriage — and she would — her father would be both scandalized and humiliated.

“You must be as wrinkled as Californian raisins.” Edna’s voice brought Clara out of her reverie. She held out a soft bath towel and wrapped it around Clara as she stood. “Let’s get you dressed.”

Clara quickly rubbed herself dry, pulled on the soft voile drawers and chemise that Edna had laid out for her and wrapped herself in a robe.

Edna found the hairpieces, combs and ribbons she would use to create the perfect ballroom style high on her head. Clara sat still for the poking, prodding and hair pulling that ensued for the next hour. By the time Edna finished, her head was already starting to ache.

Clara hefted the heavy padded bustle meant for the pink dress in one hand. “I’m not wearing this tonight. What with the weight in this bustle and a tight corset, I swear I’d fall on the dance floor and struggle to rise again with everyone laughing at me.”

“You are neither that inexperienced, nor that clumsy.” Edna laced Clara into the beautifully embroidered turquoise corset designed to go with her New York dress.

Clara sucked in a breath to make her waist as tiny as possible and settled into a rhythm of shallower breathing. Edna held a hoop petticoat on the floor for Clara to step into. “Perhaps anything sent by Henry would affect you in the same way.”

“Perhaps you are right.” Clara let Edna button the petticoat at her side and wrap a small bustle pad around her waist.

“Arms up.”

Clara complied and Edna dropped a pleated and ruched underskirt in turquoise lace over her head. The train was ridiculously long but exquisite. The bodice fit like a second skin, the chiffon decorations Edna had placed in her hair perfectly accentuating her glossy black tresses.

The sage green chiffon overskirt draped her hips and flowed over the small bustle until it reached the underskirt and train. The same material hugged her upper arms while leaving her décolletage and shoulders bare. All the better to display the platinum and diamond necklace she intended to wear.

Edna clasped her hands to her face as her eyes filled with tears. “If your dear mother could see you now.”

Clara pulled Edna close for a quick hug. “No weeping. I refuse to attend my own ball with puffy red eyes.”

Edna wiped the moisture away. “Let me fasten the necklace for you.”

Clara gazed at her reflection in the mirror, the diamonds at her throat twinkling like distant stars under the central chandelier in her dressing room. She touched her fingertips to the necklace, her mother’s favorite, and whispered. “Mother, I need to feel your presence tonight, I need your strength and grace to support me through this evening.”

“You are a picture of grace and elegance, Miss Clara. An absolute picture.”

“Thank you, Edna.” Clara fitted diamond drop earrings and pulled on long white gloves. “I daresay it’s time. Father will expect me to inspect the ballroom and give my approval before our guests arrive.”

“As is right and proper for the lady of the house.” Edna sniffled again. “I have to run a few errands. You will be all right for an hour or so, Miss?”

Clara nodded. She took in a deep breath to steel herself against tears of her own, and added the final touch, a squirt of her preferred rose-scented perfume. Edna opened the door and arranged the train, and Clara began her descent to the ballroom on the ground floor.

“You do me proud, daughter.” Father’s voice startled her. The waver in his words almost broke her resolve to end this engagement no matter what pain it caused him. Almost, but not quite. After all, her future happiness was at stake.

“Thank you, Father.” She smoothed the lace skirt as she stopped at the bottom of the stairs, the gesture more nerves than anything to do with the fabric.

He held out his arm. “Let us inspect the ballroom together.”

Staff darted about in a rush to complete last minute tasks, but several

stopped to curtsy or bow as Clara passed by. At the double doors leading into the ballroom, Clara jolted to a stop and gasped. Floral streamers reached between the chandeliers and the walls. Elegant centerpieces — huge vases filled with bright pink, fuchsia and pale pink roses, lilacs and lilies — decorated the side tables and alcoves. She laughed in delight. They must have emptied every florist in Philadelphia of their stock.

Everywhere, lighting burned as bright as the midday sun. Chairs and small tables hugged the walls, the floor cleared to allow for dancing.

“It looks wonderful and smells divine.” Clara hugged her father’s arm to her side. The room would have been perfect for any event. The perfect engagement ball, for the worst engagement.

“As it should for you, my dear.” He patted her hand. “Announcing your engagement in front of my oldest friends and Philadelphian Society will be my proudest moment.”

He was in a good mood, so she asked a question he had refused to answer previously. “Father, why the suspense? Why tell everyone you have a special announcement, but not what it is?”

“The invitations were sent weeks ago, prior to discussions, final discussions that is.” He waved his hand dismissively.

“You mean the dowry?” She lifted her brow.

“Amongst other things. The inheritance from your mother will remain yours, as will a generous sum from me.”

Clara couldn’t help releasing a low sigh. In his own way, he was trying to care for her.

“I am not casting you adrift, my dear. Never fear that I have not looked after your best interests.”

“Thank you.” She kissed his cheek. He didn’t mean to dismiss her wants and desires. Looking after her and passing her to a husband who would take over the caring duties, was ingrained into his behavior.

He released her arm. “Do you want to watch our guests arrive from the balcony?”

“Hide behind the palms, you mean?” She grinned at childhood memories of watching many balls and suppers from the balcony that curved from the central staircase.

“I want your entrance to bedazzle all our guests.”

“All eyes on me, how wonderful.” The thought sent shivers and prickles across her skin.

“Ah, the musicians are here, excuse me.” Her father must have missed the sarcasm in her voice, as he didn’t comment on it.

With a heavy heart, she watched the musicians enter and find the raised dais at the other end of the room. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt him, but if he insisted on going through with this, then how could she not?

“Clara.” The voice sent more shivers across her skin.

Riding crop in hand, Henry Norris strode toward her. His boots were covered in mud, his face reddened, and his hair wild. “This is not the gown I ordered for you.”

“Thank you for the gift, Mr. Norris, but I cannot wear it tonight. Maybe another time when I do not need freedom of movement.”

He jammed his fists on his hips. “You look beautiful in pink.”

“I don’t like the style. It’s too tight and uncomfortable for dancing. The bustle—”

“You *will* wear that gown tonight. Go change at once.”

“You cannot tell me what gown to wear.” She glared at him. “In that dress I would have to stay off the dance floor and join the wallflowers and matrons sitting along the wall. Is that what you want?”

“I am your fiancé. If I say wear the pink gown, you will do so.” Eyes tightening, he pressed closer to her, too close. He lifted a handful of chiffon. “Where did you get this monstrous outfit?”

He pulled her into an alcove, the grip on her elbow too firm, but Clara refused to back down.

“I bought it in New York. If I must marry you, I want to enjoy myself tonight. I will not wear an uncomfortable dress, in a hideous color, to dance with a man I cannot stand the sight of.”

He guffawed as if she had just told the funniest joke. “You are *mine*, Clara. You will do what I say.”

“No, I will not. You cannot control me.” She swallowed a hard lump in her thickening throat. Elopement with Roland, despite embarrassing her father, seemed like a great option again. “If you try to control me, I swear, I will make sure you are financially and socially ruined. I will not care about the cost to me.”

“What makes you think you can ruin me?” Henry tightened the grip on her elbow and raised his other hand to her throat. There was no pressure, just a touch to let her know he was in charge.

“The same reason you want to marry me. I’m the old Philadelphian here, not you.”

“You have forgotten which one of us wears the pants.” He sneered, his face far too close.

She leaned away from him.

“You will regret crossing me, dearest.” He pushed her back against the wall and held her for a few seconds before marching away and thundering for his valet to follow.

“

“You are MINE Clara and you will do as I say.” The horrid, odious, potato headed man. How dare he try and control me. Damn him and his title. I fought back but everyone saw. I will be the talk of the ball all right, but not for the right reasons!

Clara’s Journal, Saturday, July 21, 1884

Heat flushed through Clara’s body, her muscles quivered and for several long seconds she gripped the edge of the alcove to stay upright. She peeked from side to side to make sure Henry really had left the ballroom. A few staff scurried around, their gazes downcast.

It took all of her training and decorum to walk up the stairs to her room with her head held high. Thankfully it was empty, for she feared she couldn’t even face Edna at that moment.

She sat at her desk and pulled out her journal. In trembling hands she fidgeted with her fountain pen and tried to calm herself. How dare he try to control her? Her elbow still throbbed and she pulled off her glove to rub in some arnica cream. Indents left by his fingertips were already bruising. How dare he threaten her? How. Dare. He.

This was the final straw. She started scribbling down all of the thoughts raging in her head. He’d previously made it clear that she would always be second to his business interests, staying at home with a brood of sons while he traveled the world. She might become Lady Norris, but she would never see the higher echelons of European society her father wanted her to have access to.

All of this, and more, went into her journal as she tried to calm herself. A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts.

“Clara, can I come in?” Minnie’s friendly voice almost brought her to tears.

“What a beautiful gown.” Minnie crossed the room and sat on the bed

close to Clara. "Is it the one you had made in New York?"

"It is, and wearing it has already caused an argument with Henry." Clara grimaced. She couldn't imagine Minnie's fiancé ever crushing her against a wall, at her own debut ball no less. "Is Samuel here?"

"I'm sure he will attend later." Minnie, normally so poised and confident, gazed at the wall and fidgeted her hands at her waist. "Tell me about this argument."

Something was bothering Minnie. But Clara couldn't wait to share her own problem. "It was the second confrontation today. And I have argued with father, again. This morning a leering Henry let me know his guest room for tonight was but three doors down the hall."

Minnie grimaced. "You will be keeping your door locked, no doubt."

"Locked and bolted. I might ask Edna to sleep in here on a cot."

"Good idea." Minnie giggled into her hand.

"Then just a few moments ago." Clara stopped mid-thought. With a mind of its own, her hand wandered to her throat.

Minnie gripped her hand. "To be honest, as soon as we arrived, I heard you had quite an explosive tête-à-tête with Henry earlier."

"He threatened me, Minnie." Tears burned behind Clara's eyes but she blinked them away and launched into a word-by-word description of the arguments with Henry and her father, both scorched in her memory like scripts for a play.

By the time she finished Minnie had clasped her hands in front of her open mouth. "You must tell your father. Surely he will not force you into marriage with such a man."

"I think it's too late to stop it. Father and Henry have already agreed details." Agreed on a price. Clara shuddered out a single sob. That's what she was reduced to, a commodity to be bartered. She spritzed a little more perfume on her wrists, pinched her cheeks, and touched a little coralline salve to her lips. Whether the announcement was made or not, she wasn't done yet, not by a long shot.

"We should probably make our way to the balcony." Clara grabbed her Belgian lace fan, draped a dance card over her wrist, and guided Minnie from the bedroom. The sound of popular dance music and the hum of conversation surrounded them as soon as they approached the landing. "Are you and Samuel happy? How do you make decisions together? How do you handle the small things?"

“As happy as can be. Decisions of any kind seem to be the problem though. At least Henry takes charge. Samuel will not discuss a wedding date, let alone commit to one.” Minnie gripped Clara’s hand as they walked toward the small balcony. “He refuses to give me a good reason.”

“But you love him?”

“So much it hurts sometimes.” Minnie chewed her bottom lip.

Clara studied her friend. She had been so caught up in her own world she failed to notice how upset Minnie looked lately. She pressed a kiss to her cheek. She intended to find Samuel as soon as he arrived and give him a piece of her mind, not that she would let Minnie know. “Let’s survive tonight and we will devise a plan to work on Samuel.”

“Poor Samuel.” Minnie gave her a slight smile.

Clara hooked the curtains back to give them an unimpeded view over the ballroom. “My father didn’t exaggerate, the most influential people in Philadelphia stand below us.”

“Stand, sit or dance.” Minnie squeezed her hands again. “I’ve never seen your ballroom look as beautiful, or as full.”

Older businessmen, society matrons and shy wallflowers hugged the walls. Clara’s nerves ratcheted up again. All of these powerful people were expecting her to glow with excitement on the dance floor tonight. Keeping pure revulsion off her face might be the best she could manage.

“How can I help you settle your nerves?” Minnie squeezed Clara’s hand suddenly. “You know you must enter the arena below with confidence on your face or society sharks will eat you alive.”

Clara laughed at the comment. “Yes, I know. I admit I’m worried the worst gossips will notice how unfond I am of Henry when I dance with him. Unfortunately, dancing with him will be unavoidable. I doubt I will be able to fake a happy sparkle in my eyes, and I may not be able to control a flinty stare of distaste.”

“I want to dare you to fix a flinty stare on Henry every time you dance with him.” Minnie chuckled, the smile touching her eyes this time. “But I won’t because that would be wicked.”

Clara lifted her brows. It would be worth it to drive Henry into a rage and watch how he controlled his temper in front of an audience.

“There is Henry’s father.” Minnie pointed. “He is a distinguished and

handsome man, isn't he?"

"Henry must take after his mother." Clara grabbed Minnie's hand. "I see Roland."

As they watched him, he glanced up at them with a slight smile that brought out the dimples in his cheeks for a few seconds. He darted out of sight.

"What is he playing at?" Minnie leaned forward to try and spot her brother.

Clara pulled Minnie back from the balustrade. "Perhaps he chose not to draw attention to us skulking up here."

"Ladies of breeding do not skulk." Minnie imitated her elderly great-grandmother so well that they collapsed into one another in a fit of giggles that did not fit their age or status.

Clara righted herself after a few moments. A fit of the giggles maybe unbecoming, but she felt better for it and resumed watching the guests. "I'm surprised Father hasn't sent someone to call us down yet."

"He is talking with Henry's father."

Clara followed Minnie's gaze. Her father's face was turned away from her, but she had a clear view of Sir Norris's reddened face. His narrowed eyes were so similar to Henry's, her mood darkened. "Do you see Henry anywhere, Minnie?"

"I do not, that is odd."

"It's not like him to miss an opportunity to strut like a peacock in the limelight." Clara frowned. "I will ask a servant to find him."

"Let me do that, Clara. You know your father wants the guests to get their first glimpse of you when you are announced."

Clara watched Minnie leave with nervous energy knotting in her abdomen. She glanced back to the ballroom and jumped when a hand settled on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." Roland stepped back as the stirrings of a waltz pulsed through the ballroom.

The deep, rich, scent of Roland's cologne, and his honest and open smile pushed the nerves away.

"May I have this dance, Miss Penrose?"

Clara looped her train over her wrist, gave him a small curtsy and

held out her hand. His ardent gaze focused on her eyes as he touched his lips to her glove. He held her fingers in his, for a shade longer than politeness dictated, and the tiny lines around his gorgeous eyes tightened.

Roland's hand, his slender fingertips spread across the middle of her back, sent darts of delight throughout Clara's torso. Together they swirled and turned, her right hand resting on his shoulder, her left clasped in his. Their heads were never close enough to arouse gossip should anyone glance up and see them from the ballroom floor.

"Did you mean it, Roland?" Clara's voice was barely a whisper. She hated to feel anything other than an independent modern woman. But this was Roland. She had trusted him since childhood and he had never failed her. Not once.

Roland leaned his ear closer to her mouth. "Mean what?"

"You would elope with me, to save me from this?"

"In a heartbeat." He kissed her glove again, and then her cheek. "In a heartbeat and with no regrets."

The music stopped, but they stayed together.

"Apparently a servant has been sent to find your Henry." Minnie's voice startled them apart. She gazed at them both and a smile lifted her cheeks.

"He is not my Henry." Clara jammed her arms across her chest.

Roland glowered at his sister.

Minnie held up her palms in a placating gesture. "I'm just the messenger here."

Clara strode to the balustrade. "I daresay someone will come for me soon."

"Roland and I will wait for you downstairs," Minnie said softly.

Clara nodded and gave them a small wave. Nervous energy filled her and her abdomen twisted and knotted again. When she glanced back to the ballroom, a group of giggling women arrived in front of the drinks table. From her hiding place it was obvious what the women were up to. One of the women distracted the servant on duty, while another added something to the punch bowl.

Not just anyone, Grace Stotesbury, her nemesis from the academy. How the snide woman could be related to Minnie's sweet and

charming Samuel, let alone be his sister, was an enigma that would probably never be solved.

Clara glowered at the top of Grace's head. Her fair hair was piled into an elaborate style filled with tiny blue flowers that matched the flowers decorating the train of her gown. She passed not one, but two empty bottles to one of her friends. The woman scurried away, no doubt to get rid of the evidence. The evidence that Grace Stotesbury and her coterie had spiked the fruit punch.

Grace glanced at the distracted servant to ensure his gaze was elsewhere and swirled the serving spoon in the bowl. A flash of green stood out for a few seconds until it was absorbed in the peach-colored punch. Absinthe?

Just last week Father had written a long article on the evils of that drink in particular. Grace had chosen it with deliberate intent.

Grace trying to bully her was one thing. Trying to embarrass her temperance leader father by spiking the punch at her ball? No. Not happening. Clara turned on her heels, lifted the front of her skirt so she could run, and stormed through the narrow hallways meant for the servants. Breathing hard she arrived at the door closest to the drinks table. Grace was already flirting with two dandies and about to move away. Out of breath or not, she couldn't wait.

She marched to Grace, grabbed her arm and yanked her behind a cluster of palms. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Good evening to you, too." Grace raked a judgmental gaze from the top of Clara's head to the edge of her train. Her strong jawline framed a smirk Clara knew all too well.

"We both know you poured absinthe into the punch. Who do you want to embarrass, Grace, myself or my father?"

Grace fluttered her fan. "I'm not sure you need any help to embarrass yourself. You look a little flustered, Clara. Have you had harsh words with your betrothed?"

Curse gossips to purgatory and back. Did everyone know about the argument? For a second she let herself dream of throwing Grace out of the ball and wiping her hands in an exaggerated fashion. Instead Clara returned Grace's hard glare. "Come with me."

She gripped Grace's elbow in a hold that had to hurt.

"Let me go." Grace tried to shake her off. "You are making a fuss. Do you want everyone gossiping about both of us?"

“You poured alcohol into the punch bowl. I watched you do it.” She dragged Grace to the drinks table again and let out a groan. While she argued with Grace numerous people had filled cups with the spiked punch. “I refuse to allow you to ruin this ball for me, or my father. I absolutely refuse.”

“Perhaps I added water to the punch, just to see you react like a harlot.” Grace had long ago perfected the ability to deliver an insult with a flawless mask of civility.

Clara ignored the slur. “Green water?”

Grace narrowed her eyes slightly and pressed her lips together. Her gaze flicked to someone behind Clara.

“What’s wrong, Clara?” Roland pressed his palm to the small of her back as he whispered into her ear.

“Grace poured green liquid into the punch. She claims it was water.”

The servant noticed her, he gulped and his eyes widened. “Miss Clara?”

She tried in vain to remember his name. Instead she gave him a smile. “Please taste the punch.”

He blinked at her in surprise.

“I believe it contains alcohol.” Clara kept her voice low and her grip on Grace’s arm firm. “I’d like to be sure before I ask you to remove it.”

He poured a few mouthfuls into a cup, sniffed and then drank it. “Absinthe.” The man’s eyes widened and he glanced nervously from side to side as if expecting to bear the brunt of the blame.

Roland took the cup from the man and sniffed at the small amount left. “You are certain?”

“The twinges of anise and fennel are unmistakable sir, Miss Clara.” He nodded at both of them.

“Please throw it out.” She turned to face Grace. “As for you.”

Grace was about to respond, a smirk on her face, when a shriek sounded above the hum of conversation.

Only the people closest to them heard the scream and looked around, but her father darted into her view, his suit coat tails fluttering as he left the room. Clara snatched her hand from Grace’s arm, lifted her skirt and raced after him.

Roland called after her, but she didn't look back. She pushed past groups of people, whispering sorry and excuse me as she went. At the bottom of the stairs, Father and his butler spoke with their heads close together. A maid sobbed quietly into the bosom of the housekeeper. As she neared, her father darted up the steps. Clara ran after him. He stopped in front of one of the guest rooms.

She counted the doors from her own bedroom. Three. There was no reason to think something had happened to Henry. She swallowed anyway. Her pulse pounded as she followed her father into the room.

Henry lay on the floor next to the bed; his eyes open and glazed, a pool of blood spreading across the cream rug from under his chest.

“

There was so much blood. First the revolting dress, then the nasty argument with Henry, followed by Grace Stotesbury up to her usual shenanigans. I didn't think the day could get any worse. I was wrong.

Clara's Journal, Saturday (very late) July 21, 1884

“

*I*s he?” Clara stumbled back against the small writing desk close to the doorway of the guest room. She couldn't say the word dead, though Henry looked very dead indeed.

“Go to your rooms.” Her father bent next to Henry's body and tried to find a pulse at his neck.

Clara slumped frozen against the desk. “Is he, I mean how?”

“Now, Clara. I will come and speak with you later.” Father stood and squeezed her hand.

“I didn't want it to end like this,” she whispered.

He softened his gaze and his voice. “I know my dear, but you must leave.”

“I'll get her, sir.” Roland was close enough that she could feel his breath against her skin. He must have raced after her. He wrapped his arm around her waist and nudged her to the door.

“Evans.” Father called for the butler. “The Chief of Police is downstairs, we will need him.”

“Dr. Grant also, sir?”

“Good idea, and Sir Norris. We need to inform him as well. Try not to disturb the guests. Chief O'Connell might want to interview people.” He rubbed at his chin. “If this news spreads across the ballroom we will see a stampede for the doors.”

“Clara.” Roland snapped his fingers in front of her eyes.

With difficulty she pulled her gaze away from the body on the floor.

“You can do nothing to help here.” He pulled her from the room and into a brief hug in the hallway. “Everything will be all right.”

“How can you say that? Someone killed him.” Clara gripped the front of Roland’s suit with clammy hands. Henry dead? He’d been full of life and energy a few hours ago, full of anger too.

“Why jump to the conclusion someone murdered Henry?”

“Blood spread so far, I can’t believe he had any left in him.” She marveled at the calm in her voice. “It couldn’t be a mysterious sudden onset illness.” No not calm, she was numb.

She hadn’t liked the man, or wanted him for a husband, but who could have gone so far as to kill him? Roland?

With a sharp exhale she twisted out of his grasp. “Did you?” She tried to calm her racing thoughts.

“Did I kill him?” He whispered back. “No. I might have done if there was no other way to keep you safe, but it is--I mean, was--too early to make that call.”

She believed him. He would kill for her, but only if he could find no other options. Elopement was a much better choice than murder.

“Shall I escort you?” Roland held out his arm. She took it and he led her the short distance to her sitting room.

At the door, Clara grasped his arm more firmly. “I’m sorry, for asking, you know.”

“I’m honored to think you consider me a champion of your honor.” Roland flourished a bow befitting a queen.

She lightly punched his arm. “We argued earlier.”

“You argued with Henry?”

“It was ugly; he threatened me.” Her knees wobbled and Roland gripped her tighter. “I think I threatened him, too.”

Roland’s expression hardened.

Clara wanted to both comfort him and relieve the pressure in her chest by talking about the arguments. “Come in and I’ll tell you.”

He gripped the doorjamb. He’d been in her suite of rooms a few times,

but always with Minnie.

“We can leave the door wide open for propriety sake.” Clara lurched to the sofa, and crumpled against the armrest as she sat. “Our last words together showed how little Henry and I cared for one another, and someone overheard us.” Probably several people, given the number of staff running around the ballroom with final preparations for the ball.

Roland’s face showed the moment when curiosity overcame indecision. He swung the door completely open and stood on the rug facing her.

“All the gossips seem to know about it.” Clara’s cheeks heated. She couldn’t bring herself to look into Roland’s face. “Minnie heard shortly after she arrived. Grace threw a question in my face that showed she heard the gossip, too.”

“Shall I find Minnie for you?”

“No.” She couldn’t bear to be alone waiting for news from her father. Truthfully, she didn’t want to be parted from Roland. “Stay, please.”

Roland dropped into the easy chair so he could sit and face her.

As she had done earlier with Minnie, she recounted the arguments that had punctuated her day. At the end she jammed her hand over her mouth and whispered, “Chief O’Connell will think I did it.”

“Of course he won’t.” Roland grabbed her hand. “As if you would hurt anyone.”

Clara wanted the door closed so they could talk in confidence, but Roland would never agree to sully her reputation in such a way. “Would you ring the bell for Edna please?”

The maid arrived in a few minutes, bright eyed and out of breath. No doubt the servants floor was alive with discussion and argument about Henry’s death. She dropped into a casual curtsy. “Tea and toast, Miss Clara?”

“Perfect, and could you find Minnie for me please and send up enough for three.”

Edna took in the scene, nodded at Roland and left quietly.

Clara and Roland sat in silence, her hand still in his.

Minnie walked in moments later, hands on her hips. “What is going on? You both disappeared, Mother is asking after you, and what on

earth happened with Grace?"

"Close the door please, Minnie." Clara held her hand out to her friend.

Minnie pressed the door shut behind her and darted to Clara's side. She scooted close to Clara, hooked her arm around her waist, and looked from Clara to Roland expectantly.

"Grace spiked the punch with absinthe and Henry is dead." Clara lowered her voice to a whisper. "Murdered."

When Edna returned with tea, toast and cake the three were deep in conversation. An hour later a sharp knock sounded against the door. Clara started like a frightened rabbit. Roland rose, opened the door, and admitted her father.

"Henry Norris is dead, likely stabbed." He rubbed his temples. "Chief O'Connell says it could be self-inflicted, though it is a very unusual way to end one's own life, and there is no sign of the weapon used. Not a word of this to anyone outside of the people who already know. We won't be able to avoid a social scandal. I may even need to announce your engagement and regrets at your fiancé's death on the same day."

"Are you suggesting suicide?" Clara's mouth dropped open. "He wouldn't."

"No, he would not." A new voice entered the conversation, and Clara looked up. Henry's father, Sir Norris, strode into the room.

"Now, Sir Norris..." Clara's father held his palms forward.

"Everyone is talking about your argument with my son, Miss Penrose." Sir Norris pointed a finger at Clara. "You threatened to end him."

"Me?" Clara scoffed. "I may have threatened to end his social life. We were arguing. I'm sure we both said things we did not mean."

"You admit you threatened him?"

"Sir Norris, please. My daughter has always been strong-willed." Clara's father moved to stand between them. "She has just learned that her fiancé is dead." He looked to her, and then shook his head. "She may not have chosen to marry your son, but she is far too refined —"

"Someone will hang for this." Sir Norris backed to the open doorway and pointed at Clara. "I swear someone *will* hang for this crime!" He fled the room and slammed the door behind him.

“He has never much liked me.” Clara tried to laugh but her voice cracked instead.

“The nerve of the man.” Father shook his head sadly. “Do not lower yourself to gossip about this matter. To anyone. I suggest you stay in your rooms for the next few days.”

Locked inside like a guilty prisoner. Only the remorse she felt at wishing to end the engagement and her lack of grief over Henry’s death stopped her from complaining. “Do you accuse me as well, Father?”

“Of course I do not.” He kneaded his forehead as if he could massage away the nastiness of the evening. “But please, do not draw attention to yourself.”

“I won’t, but please do not announce anything. It would be unseemly.”

“Surely you do not think Chief O’Connell could suspect Clara, sir?” Roland raked his fingertips through his hair, mussing his waves and sending shorter pieces across his forehead.

Clara resisted the urge to smooth his thick tresses back. Very doubtful Father would react well to such behavior from her, especially within hours of her fiancé-to-be dying.

“Unprompted, I doubt it. Unfortunately, Sir Norris may not be old money, but he is cunning and not without influence.” Her father trod softly to the door and pulled it open. “I won’t announce anything Clara, and I suggest you get some sleep.”

“Darling girl.” Roland’s mother stepped lightly into Clara’s room.

Clara stood to embrace her and had to fight to stop tears from falling.

“Do not worry about a thing. We overheard Sir Norris from the hallway and my husband is talking with your father.” She chuckled Clara under the chin. “Promise you will send for me if you need my company or advice.”

Clara nodded as she whispered the promise. Mrs. Fisher had always treated her with kindness, especially after Clara’s own mother passed away.

“We should leave you to rest.” Minnie wrapped Clara in a warm hug.

Roland pressed a kiss to her forehead and wished her sweet dreams. She wasn’t alone for long; Edna must have been waiting in the hallway because she entered as soon as Minnie and Roland left.

Clara had never been more grateful for the suite of rooms her father let her occupy. If she had to stay glued to the house then at least she could enjoy her privacy and comfort. Clara sat at her dressing table and watched in silence as Edna pulled the pins and decorations from her hair then brushed and braided the tresses for bed.

Undressing was faster than dressing. It wasn't long before she'd wrapped a dressing robe over her nightdress. She had one last thing to do before sleep. She tiptoed out of her room and glanced from side to side. No one stood outside the guest room. A shudder wracked her as she remembered Henry's mutilated body. Luckily Grandma Beth's room was in the opposite direction.

Clara tapped on the door upon arriving. No one answered but she quietly opened the door to see if her maternal grandmother was awake.

Poor Grandma Beth, her body so often tight with pain, lay asleep on the bed, her face relaxed. She deserved sweet dreams, so Clara closed the door softly and returned to her room with a promise to herself to see Grandma soon. Clara tried to write in her journal; tried to record everything that happened and all her thoughts about the day in the hope that she would be able to sleep.

She started a page headed 'clues' and another headed 'suspects', but fatigue crashed over her and she clambered into bed before she fell asleep at her desk. Unfortunately, she couldn't think of a single person apart from herself to add to the suspect list, and it took a long time before the mental fatigue morphed into a restless sleep.

“

Who else would want him dead but me? The suspect list I started is horribly short. Sir Norris believes it was me who stabbed his son. If he influences the Chief of Police will they arrest me? It's almost 1am but how can I sleep? Perhaps more suspects will come to me in my dreams, but I can't help almost drowning in a mess of swirling nerves and dread.

Clara's Journal, (very early) Sunday, July 22, 1884

Sunday morning arrived with summer sunshine and birdsong, but Clara woke as tired as the night before. She no longer had to defy her father about marrying Henry, but that was the only good thing that came from her disastrous debut ball. That, and the offer of elopement from Roland. Delicious warmth flooded her chest as her smile built. The almost-proposal lifted her spirits immeasurably.

Edna gave her a quick hug after helping her into her day dress. “Chin up. We all know you didn’t do it.”

No prizes for guessing who did believe she wielded the sharp implement that cut Henry and made him bleed. The image of Sir Norris in the open doorway pointing at her, his vehemently stated words, *I swear, someone will hang for this crime*, and the ringing of the slammed door as he stormed out continued to play on repeat in her brain.

She walked down to the breakfast room in a thoughtful mood, her journal in hand and intent on adding more to her list of clues and suspects. When she arrived, a servant directed her to the dining room instead. She lifted her brow but the servant darted away before she could ask why.

She entered the dining room with her curiosity piqued.

“Mr. Fisher, what a surprise.” Not really a surprise as Mrs. Fisher mentioned last night that her husband spoke with Father. It couldn’t be a coincidence that Roland’s father, a notable private investigator in

Philadelphia, attended them at breakfast the morning after Henry's death, yet the social niceties had to be maintained. "What brings you here this morning?"

Clara helped herself to toast, eggs, baked tomatoes and the cook's delicious fried potatoes.

Father answered. "I have hired William, Mr. Fisher, to look into the matter. Chief O'Connell refuses to investigate further without a full autopsy report, which could be several days away. In the meantime, Sir Norris is sprouting rumors and gossip faster than a market of fish wives."

As far as Father was concerned, Henry's murder and Sir Norris's accusation of her was simply *the matter*. Clara furrowed her brow as she buttered her bread. "I don't understand why he is so certain I killed Henry."

Father tutted and shook his head, no doubt disturbed at the directness of her language.

"Did you?" Mr. Fisher stared in an unnerving way.

"No." Clara and her father spoke at the same time and shared a genuine though brief smile.

"How do you know Sir Norris is sprouting rumors?" Clara asked her father.

He moved the newspaper as if to hide it under his hands.

"Is there something in the paper this morning? If it concerns me then I should be permitted to see it."

"That is not necessary." He folded the paper and waved a servant over to take it away.

It was the *Philadelphia Times*. If they didn't have a copy in the kitchen, Minnie might be able to get hold of one from her own household.

"Can you account for your time yesterday afternoon, Miss Penrose?" Mr. Fisher seemed determined to keep her on track.

"I don't recall being alone for more than a few minutes, from my argument with Henry in the ballroom, to finding him in his room." Him, his body, and the ugly reality smashed into her thoughts. Clara hid her trembling fingers in her lap.

Mr. Fisher wrote notes as they spoke. "Unfortunately your distaste for the marriage arrangement was well known, and without a strong alibi

you will be looked at as a possible suspect.”

Clara massaged her temples. “I don’t believe it possible for anyone to get from the ballroom to the kitchen to get a knife, then to the guest room to stab Henry, then back to my room in time to greet Minnie and all without getting a drop of blood on my gown.”

“You can be sure I will test that theory and include it in my findings.”

“There was so much blood,” Clara whispered. She raised her chin and faced Mr. Fisher. “I am sure our heated argument is a factor in Sir Norris’s incorrect assumptions.”

He must have heard the gossip as it spread from servant to servant. Most likely he heard about both arguments, not just the one right before the ball.

“I’m sure it is.” Mr. Fisher fixed his clear gaze on Clara; she might as well have been trapped in quicksand. A primitive sense of survival told her there was no point in trying to wriggle away or she would get pulled under. His voice was gentle but firm. “Tell me about yesterday.”

Clara glanced at her father. She suddenly felt awkward, and didn’t want him to hear the blow-by-blow description of her arguments with Henry. Mr. Fisher seemed to pick up on her nervousness.

“Rather than disturb your breakfast, perhaps I could speak with you later this morning?” Mr. Fisher smiled and all she saw was Roland. He had his father’s eye color, too. “I’m sorry to push you Miss Penrose, but I’d like to be as prepared as possible for the inquest this afternoon.”

“Will I need to go—“

“No, my dear.” Father patted her hand. “Ladies do not attend inquests.”

Clara rubbed at her temples again, a headache on the horizon. She didn’t want to keep talking about her horrid debut ball, though Roland’s father needed accurate information if he was to investigate and find the real culprit.

“I will attend the inquest today to represent the Penrose family,” Mr. Fisher said.

Clara frowned. “How will a decision be made at the inquest without the autopsy results?”

“The coroner will have a preliminary report. I daresay he will make a

finding of unlawful killing by a person or persons unknown. That is the signal for an investigation to start, but the full report will be thorough and lengthy, hence the time delay.” Mr. Fisher answered her question with a kindly gleam in his eyes.

“This is not an appropriate discussion at the breakfast table. I’ll have a tray sent up to your room.” Her father strode to the bell pull on the wall and rang for a servant. “Let me know when you are ready, and you can talk with Mr. Fisher in the drawing room.”

“Perhaps Minnie...” With a swallow of almost cold tea, she glanced from one man to the other.

“Good idea.” Mr. Fisher spoke first. “I’ll send for her.”

Clara did not get far before she had to steady herself against a column in the hallway. If only Minnie were here right now to help her up the stairs, hold her hand, and reassure her that everything would be okay.

“Did she see the body last night?” Mr. Fisher spoke loud enough for her to hear.

“She did.” Father answered, distaste clear in his tone. “But she did not get close and Roland soon led her back to her own rooms.”

“She obviously saw the blood?”

“Would have been hard to miss, and despite her shock she clearly remembers that I told her Henry had been stabbed.”

“She is curious and intelligent.”

Clara brightened at the compliment from Minnie and Roland’s father.

“It was an unfortunate slip, the less she knows the better,” Father said.

Clara bristled. They meant to keep her in the dark. Did Mr. Fisher think her intelligent, but susceptible to feminine sensitivities? Men. She didn’t doubt that Mr. Fisher would do his best, but she had no intention of letting anyone push her into her rooms with a handkerchief and laudanum.

It sounded like a quaint idea. Perhaps they intended to show her as a weak female who couldn’t possibly wield whatever weapon killed Henry. But Henry’s father was a proud man. After rejecting Henry’s proposal twice, he must realize she was adamantly opposed to the betrothal. Unfortunately, the rest of Philadelphia society now also knew it. He wanted someone to hang for killing his son, and she made an easy target.

Or so he thought.

Obviously Father found murder a perfectly acceptable topic of discussion for the breakfast table, as long as she was not seated at it.

“There you are.” Edna scurried along the hallway and wrapped her arm around Clara’s waist. “Let’s get you upstairs and we will bring up a fresh tray of tea.”

Clara didn’t resist. She let Edna guide her up the stairs. Young Bessie, Edna’s newest helper, followed them with fresh tea and her breakfast plate in a domed food warmer.

“Bring me the *Philadelphia Times* please, Bessie.”

The young girl blushed scarlet.

Edna glared at Clara while she rubbed Bessie’s shoulder blades. “It’s okay lovey, if anyone says anything just tell them Edna asked you for it.”

Clara held up her palms to placate Edna. “I know Father doesn’t like me reading the paper, but it seems there is something in this morning’s issue about me.”

When Bessie returned, breathless but grinning, and handed over the newspaper, Clara settled on her sofa with breakfast and scoured the paper. Her face tightened when she read the offensive article.

“Edna, listen to this. In amongst a lot of other rubbish, the writer states:

“

A reliable source told this correspondent that murder is suspected in the surprising death of Mr. Henry Norris last night at the Penrose Estate. Police are looking closely at those dearest to him. It seems that his alleged engagement to Miss Clara Penrose was to be announced yesterday. My source declared that the proposed betrothal was fraught with argument and Miss Penrose’s distaste for the match is well known.

How could they?” She slapped the paper onto the sofa’s armrest. No wonder Father would rather she did not read it. Too late now. Was there any way she could help uncover the real culprit quickly so the scandal around her would die down?

Mother always said a good cup of tea couldn’t cure everything, but it

went a long way to helping one feel better. Clara wrapped her hands around the cup and let the warmth seep into her bones, but it did nothing to ease her growing irritation.

"I will wear the navy blue walking ensemble for meeting with Mr. Fisher."

"Good choice Miss, it's conservative and respectful, yet a step away from full mourning." Edna bustled into her dressing room to find the appropriate clothing.

Clara slumped back against the sofa, her chest tight. She felt no grief at all at Henry's passing, nor felt inclined to honor him with mourning. How would Edna judge her for such thoughts; how would anyone judge her? She settled on a half-truth. "A part of me wants to wear something light and pretty to celebrate my freedom."

"We both know that would never do, not yet." Edna returned with an armful of clothing and started arranging it in order at the foot of her bed. She gave her a smile that reached her glossy eyes. "We also both know that, regardless of what you thought about the man, you will honor a life cut short and show your respect appropriately."

Clara jumped at a knock on the door.

Edna admitted Minnie and Clara found herself enveloped in soft seersucker and Minnie's arms. They hugged tightly for a few moments.

"I'm so glad Father is looking after you." Minnie stepped back to take in Clara's appearance. "How are you coping?"

"I'm coping. He will question me as soon as I'm ready." Clara held onto Minnie's arms. "Stay with me while I dress?"

"Darling girl, I will not leave you until you tell me to go."

"I must apologize Minnie, I completely forgot to ask you about Samuel. Did he arrive later last evening like you expected?"

"He did not. But let's focus on Henry's murder and helping you." She helped herself to tea from Clara's breakfast tray, not quite meeting Clara's gaze but her expression resolute.

There would be no moving Minnie when she was in this mood. She did not want to talk about Samuel at all.

An hour later, Clara and Minnie perched on the edge of overstuffed ladies chairs opposite Mr. Fisher who occupied a throne-like gentleman's chair in the drawing room.

"I apologize for keeping you, Mr. Fisher." Clara sat straight with her hands in her lap, her ankles delicately crossed, the picture of a modern and well-bred young woman.

"My time has not been wasted." He opened his notebook at a new page. "Questioning the staff in cases like this always produces interesting information."

Clara lifted her brow. "You discovered—"

"I can't share any information without affecting your recollection of the evening. I need you to tell me everything you remember. Try not to make assumptions about anything you don't clearly recall. Minnie, you must remain quiet unless I direct a question to you. Do you both understand?"

They both nodded and Minnie squeezed Clara's hand.

"Good. Miss Penrose, talk me through your day."

"From when I first awakened?" Clara's cheeks heated. It didn't help that she had known Roland's father for as long as Roland himself. "Please call me Clara, Miss Penrose sounds so formal."

He nodded his agreement. "I understand from Minnie and Roland, that you argued with Henry in the garden prior to lunch yesterday. Perhaps start there."

Clara sagged a little; beyond grateful that Roland's father didn't want to hear about the tender moments she shared with his son. Her first meeting with Henry yesterday was clear in her mind. "Henry called me cold, laughed at me, then leaned far too close and told me that he would stay here last night. He emphasized his guest room was just three doors along from mine."

"How did you react to that rather suggestive comment?"

"I told him that his sleeping arrangements were no concern of mine, but he laughed again."

Mr. Fisher frowned as he wrote more notes. "When did you next see Henry?"

Clara shivered as the second argument played out in her mind.

"Take your time."

"Just before the ball, he became angry that I was not wearing a gown he ordered for me from Paris." She took a few deep breaths. "I thanked him and explained I chose not to wear it as it afforded very

little freedom of movement. He ordered me to change at once.”

“Several people told me you threatened Henry.”

“I did. But only after he threatened me.” She gulped in another lungful of air. Reliving the argument was even worse than she anticipated. “He pulled me into an alcove, gripping my arm so tightly he left bruises.”

“Has anyone else seen the bruises?”

“Edna, and Minnie also.”

Mr. Fisher fixed his gaze on Minnie. She answered his unspoken question. “Clara’s elbow is mottled black and purple.”

“I see. How did you react to his behavior?”

“I told him I couldn’t stand the thought of marrying him. That I wouldn’t allow him to control me, and if he tried, I’d ensure he was financially and socially ruined. His grip on my elbow hurt, and he raised his other hand to my throat. Not hard enough to leave a mark, I think he was letting me know he was in charge.” Clara lowered her gaze. As if she didn’t already have enough reason to kill him, this nasty argument added more weight to the case against her. “It’s damning, isn’t it?”

Clara twisted her hands in her lap. Of all times to have an argument overheard, why did it have to be this one? She straightened her back again and held her head high. “I did not murder him. The thought didn’t occur to me. I would never bring disgrace upon the Penrose family, and as much as I wanted to avoid the engagement, I would never put my father in such a position.”

Mr. Fisher tapped his pencil against his chin as if deep in thought. “That was the last time you saw him?”

“He told me that I would regret crossing him, then held me against the wall for a few seconds before marching away and calling for his valet to follow at his heels.”

“From that incident you went straight to the balcony?”

She shook her head. “I went to my room; I had to calm down before showing myself in public. I’m so grateful Minnie came to find me.”

“How long were you alone in your room?”

Clara frowned. “I have no idea, I was angry. I tried to write in my journal but it was difficult. Why does it matter?”

“The less alone time the better. Once we get the autopsy report from the coroner we may have a better estimate as to the time of death. All we know is that he died sometime between arriving at Penrose Estate and the discovery of his body.”

“Father.” Minnie leaned forward.

He lifted his eyebrows at her. “I trust you have a very good reason for interrupting?”

“Have you spoken to the valet? He followed Henry to the guest room after the argument; I would be surprised if he left Henry Norris any earlier than I arrived in Clara’s room. I can vouch for Clara from then until Roland and I left her on the balcony so you just need to ask him when he left Henry.”

“My goodness.” Clara’s eyes widened. “Maybe the valet did it.”

“Possibly, but Chief O’Connell is still searching for the man.”

Tarnation! Of all the times for the valet to disappear. It was one thing Clara couldn’t do much about. “Henry was stabbed, wasn’t he? Were any of his valuables stolen?”

“Your father does not wish you to know all the details.”

“He told me Henry was stabbed last night. At least we are calling it murder, not suicide like someone bandied around last night.”

“It was definitely murder.” Mr. Fisher pocketed his notebook and pencil. “I just need to find the culprit.”

The interview was over. Mr. Fisher gave Clara a slight smile.

If the culprit was not found, would that give more people than Sir Norris reason to suspect her? “It was not me, I swear.”

Clara stood so that Mr. Fisher could also stand and leave the room. He proffered his hand to give her a professional handshake. The simple courtesy almost undid her.

“I believe you are innocent, Miss Penrose. Do not fear. I will prove it.” He gave them both a nod and left them.

If only Clara could hold onto the same belief. It wasn’t that she doubted Mr. Fisher, but she had to find a way to make sure this scandal died down and the real culprit was caught quickly.

“

In all my life, I never imagined I would be interrogated as a suspect in a murder. I know Mr Fisher was gentle with me, but I still felt like a criminal inside. I can't sit waiting for someone else to save me, I know it's what Father wants. But I just cannot do it. I will not let this turn of events change me into a wilting damsel in distress.

Clara's Journal, Sunday, July 22, 1884

“*T*

hat wasn't so bad." Minnie took Clara's arm. "Shall we walk in the gardens, or would you prefer more tea?"

"Tea is sloshing around in my stomach, I've drunk so much of it this morning." Clara shook out her arms to try and stop them from trembling and pushed her fears and the image of Henry's body to the back of her mind. "I'd drink a large mug of coffee if it wouldn't send Father into an epic lather. I have so many ideas fighting for space in my head I feel the urgent need to share it with you and Roland."

Minnie gave her a slight smile. "As it is term break I'm sure Roland is home. Let's walk through the gap in the garden fence."

Clara glanced around to make sure they were alone before walking to the Fisher Estate. It wasn't far, but further than sitting in her room like her father suggested.

Minnie knocked on the back door. A maid answered and furrowed her brows. "What are you doing at this door, Miss Penrose, Miss Fisher?"

"Is my brother home?" At the maid's nod, Minnie continued. "Tell him we await him in the sitting room." She pushed into the heavenly scented kitchen and guided Clara past their cook preparing lunch. A tray of scones sat on a tray on the bench.

"Scones with jam and cream, Miss Minnie?" the cook asked.

"Yes, please, for three in the sitting room." Minnie guided Clara from

the narrow dim back hallway to the light-filled foyer and into the small sitting room at the front of the house.

This was Mrs. Fisher's private space and beautifully decorated in the Japanese style in soft pastel colors. Clara swept up her small train and sank into the soft armchair by the fireplace. The beautiful little mahogany clock on the mantel chimed the hour and Roland strode into the room.

He didn't stop until he came to the armchair and knelt before her. "You have no idea how much I wanted to race to your home with my father."

Clara gripped his hands. "Your father was quite sweet as he interviewed me. I'm worried though."

"Father will prove your innocence. I'm sure of it." Roland kissed her knuckles.

"I need to do something, be part of the investigation, despite both of our fathers trying to stop me."

"They are just trying to keep you safe, Clara." Minnie sat opposite Clara and adjusted her skirts to keep them away from the grate.

Maybe, but it didn't make their suffocating behavior any easier to take.

Roland dragged an ottoman across to sit between the two ladies. "Talk me through your theories."

Clara laughed. "How do you know I have theories?"

Roland let out a booming laugh. "You always do."

Minnie settled back into her chair to watch the exchange with interest.

Clara stood and paced across the room. "First there is Grace. In her effort to embarrass me, she may have poisoned people, including Henry, instead of making them tipsy."

"Did anyone see him drink from the punch bowl?" Roland asked. "Even if he did, didn't your father say Henry was stabbed?"

Yes, and no one said Henry had been downstairs. But darn it, couldn't Grace be guilty of something serious? "Perhaps more than one person was involved? One person who poisoned him and another who came by later to rob him, but the poison hadn't quite knocked him out, just made him slow and easier to stab. There is the missing valet, of

course.”

“What sort of dime novels have you read lately?” Roland laughed.

“You are not taking this seriously at all.” Clara felt like stamping her foot, but that childish action would make Roland laugh even more. “I didn’t see any head injuries, but maybe he was set upon by a duo of enemies who knocked him out then ended up killing him.” She rubbed at her forehead as she paced. Her own head bled quite a bit when she fell off a horse as a child.

“A dastardly duo of enemies?” Roland smirked.

“Will you help or not?” Clara paced back to him and slapped at his hand.

“Father will get to the bottom of the problem—“

“It’s not that I doubt him, Roland. I just have to do something or I will go mad.”

“Father is interviewing the servants, you know how they see and hear everything.” Minnie caught Clara’s hand as she paced past.

“Will they tell him anything useful, though?” Clara continued her pacing. “We have to find the real culprit and soon.”

“I will help, Clara.” Minnie grinned. “If we talk with the servants they may be more forthcoming to us.”

Roland stood and stretched. “I will also help. The male servants may divulge more to another man.”

Clara beamed at them both.

“Sir Norris asked me to call on him.” Roland sighed, and jammed his hands in his pockets. “I think he wants help in identifying his son’s friends. I’m sure I can wrangle a chat with some of the servants at least.”

With his angelic face and charm, Roland could get anyone to talk. Clara gestured in her excitement. “Let’s catch up later today. We can compare what we’ve discovered and plan our next steps.”

Roland caught Clara’s hand, turned it over and kissed her palm. “I’m so glad to see your brightness and enthusiasm return.”

Mrs. Fisher swept into the room followed by a parlor maid carrying a tray laden with British-style scones with jam and clotted cream plus tea for four.

She kissed Clara's cheek. "How are you, my dear?"

"Much better with my best friends for company."

She laughed. "You always have behaved like the three musketeers on an adventure. Continue to take care of one another and all will be well. Shall I pour?"

Clara returned to her seat and spent a pleasant hour chatting with the Fisher family, about anything except the murder, and eating their British-born cook's delicious treat.

Roland rose first. "I must take my leave to visit with Sir Norris." He gave Clara a wink, no doubt reminding her that he would also talk with the staff in residence.

"We should also leave if we intend to catch my servants before they are tied up with lunch preparation. Thank you so much for a wonderful break from reality, Mrs. Fisher." Clara pulled Minnie to her feet.

"This is also your reality Clara, more so than the temporary nightmare you have been thrown into."

Clara couldn't find an answer that wouldn't bring tears to her eyes so she joined arms with Minnie and they waved at Mrs. Fisher on their way out. With the company and support of her two best friends Clara held her head high, fearless and ready to take on any challenge. They might not be heroic, chivalrous swordsmen, but they would fight for justice in their own way.

"Has Henry ever behaved so abominably before?" Minnie gripped Clara's arm as they walked to the Penrose property.

"Not like he did yesterday." Clara shook her head. "But I rarely gave him reason to, and I've never refused to do something he ordered me to do before."

"I know one should not speak ill of the dead." Minnie lowered her voice. "But I for one am very relieved he is gone from your life."

"I concur with that sentiment." Clara stopped on the pathway not far from the back door. "Let's start in the kitchen. I think we will find it the best place to hear gossip."

Clara stiffened her resolve. Leading up to last night she had done little to investigate Henry's character. She'd focused on trying to persuade her father not to pursue the arrangement. She had tried to explain how being close to Henry made her tingle uncomfortably as if

crawling insects covered her skin. But he couldn't understand her feelings. The thought of talking about the man brought the tingles back.

"Are you all right, Clara?" Minnie shook her arm gently until Clara refocused her gaze onto her friend's face.

Clara swallowed, twice. "I will be."

"Will it help if I ask the questions?"

"Could you start? I'll join in if we find out anything interesting."

"Of course, while I hate why we are here, I'm excited to be involved in the investigation." Minnie grinned and some of the tension in Clara's neck eased.

Over an hour later they settled in Clara's sitting room with a light luncheon of sandwiches and seed cake. The cook and her maids were a font of information. Reluctant to speak of Henry at first, once they opened up, Clara and Minnie found themselves silenced by the sordid information they heard.

"I'm not surprised our staff found Henry cold and harsh." Clara was the first to speak. "He treated them with disdain at best."

"I'm surprised at the number of rumors about him accosting various maids." Minnie poured more tea for both of them. "Not to mention the rumor he enjoyed affairs with married women."

"Including two at once over Christmas." Clara cut the cake into thin slices. "I recall when he lent me a maid to assist Edna after the poor thing badly sprained her ankle. She was very pretty--the maid from Henry I mean--but she had bruises going right up her arms. She told me she was clumsy. But she didn't fall or walk into anything while here." Clara tapped her chin. "Do you think Sir Norris could have tired of his son's bad behavior?"

"Tired, and what? No!" Minnie looked at her with wide eyes. "Even if that were the case, Sir Norris would have threatened him with loss of allowance, a change to his inheritance, something of that ilk. He would not murder his only heir."

"I daresay you are right." Clara added his name to her growing list of suspects anyway.

At a sharp rap on the door, Clara hid her notebook beneath the seat. Edna came in with a fresh pot of tea and a tray of sandwiches. Roland followed her, a huge grin on his face.

The door closed behind Edna with a soft thump. Clara returned his smile and held her hand out to Roland. "We have uncovered a number of rumors. Your grin suggests you have information to share with us?"

"I think I can trump your find, but we shall see. Why don't you start, Clara?" Roland pressed his lips to the bare skin on her hand.

Her heart fluttered at the touch of his soft lips and she pulled her hand back to her chest.

Minnie filled the silence between them as she poured him a cup of tea and he settled himself on the sofa next to Clara. "We discovered that Henry was rough with the maids in his households and enjoyed affairs with married women."

"Rough is an understatement." Roland fisted his hands before smiling again. "Do you know the names of his paramours?"

"Just one, Mrs. Justine Thomas." She pulled out her notebook. "I have already added Mr. Thomas to the list of suspects. What did you find out, Roland?"

"I talked to several maids at his father's house. It seems he kept only a butler and valet at his townhouse so I am guessing that is where he met with his lovers. He slept in his suite of rooms at the Norris Estate often though, and one of the young girls told me a horrific story regarding her fellow maid and friend Amy."

Minnie blushed and Clara gripped the pencil so hard she feared it might snap. Her voice sounded unnatural and breathy when she found the ability to speak. "I feared we might find dreadful things out about the man. Amy is the maid he sent to me when Edna could not work for a week."

Roland straightened. "Forgive me ladies, I have spoken out of turn and distressed you both."

"I need to know the truth." Clara gripped his forearm. "I doubt Henry would have spared my feelings if our marriage went ahead. I met Amy, I saw bruises and did nothing to help her."

Minnie, her color still high, nodded her agreement. "Don't blame yourself, you trust people, you may not have liked Henry, but you trusted in his respectability."

She nodded, though she did blame herself and the idea sickened her.

"Stop me I beg you." Roland gulped. "If the story I tell distresses you too much."

At Clara's nod he settled back against the sofa. "Henry carried on an affair with Amy, he told her that he loved her and his engagement to you meant nothing to him. He promised to look after her, even after your marriage, but then a few weeks ago he had her fired and told her he never wanted to see her again."

Clara pursed her lips. "Is it possible that Amy killed him?"

Roland shrugged. "It seems unlikely. How would she overpower a strong man like Henry, even if she could gain admittance to the Penrose residence?"

"The valet." Minnie gasped. "Perhaps he was her accomplice and committed the act."

Roland scratched his chin. "He still hasn't shown his face as far as I know."

With a slight smile, Clara penciled in two more names on her list of suspects.

Roland glanced at Clara's notebook. "Sir Norris is on the suspect list?"

"We saw his temper, firstly with Father in the ballroom, and then later when he accused me." Clara's stomach twisted in knots. "I doubt either of our fathers would tolerate the notion of his open cruelty to me."

"Not for a moment." Roland nodded his agreement.

Clara stood and paced across the floor. Walking always helped her to think clearly, and she needed her wits about her like never before. "Both the Norris and Penrose names would suffer if news of Henry's behavior became common knowledge."

"Unfortunately it's a common enough taint," Minnie said, "I still see Sir Norris as a poor prospect. Where would he have found a weapon?"

Clara stopped pacing for a few seconds. "The kitchen was so busy he could have snuck in and out without being noticed."

Roland shook his head. "More likely he carried a small dagger with him. Many men do."

"He was very quick to point an accusing finger at Clara." Minnie sniffed. "A ghastly thing to say of someone so sweet."

"That's true, and I'm afraid I haven't finished Amy's story."

Clara sat down again, her hands stiff in her lap.

Roland swirled the tea left in his almost empty cup. "It is too early for a stiff drink, unfortunately."

"Nonsense, it is after lunchtime." Clara darted to the small liquor cabinet in her sitting room. Father permitted her to keep sherry, whiskey and gin, and she poured Roland a tumbler of whiskey.

Their fingers touched as she gave him the glass and her heart fluttered again.

Drink in hand, Roland continued with Amy's story. "Amy found herself carrying his child, twice in fact. The first time he forced her to give the child up for adoption, the second time, he forced her to go to a backstreet woman to procure a termination." Roland's gaze caught Clara's. "According to the maid I spoke with, Amy became despondent after that."

Clara touched the cameo at her throat. "Understandably so, and then to be cast aside like yesterday's rubbish, the poor thing. If she did kill him, he deserved it."

"You implied earlier that you discovered the name of Henry's second married lover." Minnie blushed furiously.

Clara brightened. "Another name to add to the suspect list."

Roland grinned. "You will not believe it when I tell you it is Mrs. Henshaw."

Clara and Minnie dropped their mouths open at the same time. Clara recovered first. "Violet Henshaw? The Violet who couldn't even talk to a man without stuttering?"

"Mr. Henshaw is a brute." Minnie shuddered. "I saw him whip a young servant until he howled in pain once. I will never forget it."

Clara flourished her pencil. "Mr. Henshaw is on the list. What is our next step?"

"I think that is all we can do today. I have some ideas we can explore in town tomorrow. Will your father permit me to take you?" Roland checked his pocket watch.

Clara leaned forward. "What sort of ideas?"

"From Sir Norris, I learned that Henry had been meeting with out-of-town businessmen in the days before his death." Roland stretched out his long legs. "I also discovered they are both still here, and grumbling to anyone who will listen."

Clara's eyes widened. Henry had a reputation as a calm negotiator, with a predator's ability to scent and exploit the smallest weakness. "Who? How? Where?"

"A gentleman must protect his sources of information." Roland tapped the side of his nose. "Let your father know that I will be taking you to McGillions Grand Old Ale House. It has a respectable ladies dining area, and is famous for its eggs Benedict and omelets." He gave a discreet cough. "Though it pains me to be deceitful, it might be better if you do not mention we are meeting two gentlemen of business."

"I can accompany you as a chaperone if Edna cannot." Minnie smiled. "I have an appointment with my seamstress and she has several outfits ready for the final fitting."

"Please do, Minnie. As much as I adore Edna, I feel like this is our adventure. I will talk to Father at dinner." Clara glanced at her friends and her gaze settled on Roland. "I appreciate everything you are doing to help me."

"I'm glad it is summer break, but even if it that were not the case, I would take time off my studies. I can't think of anything I would rather be doing." Roland's eyes sparkled and his cheeks flushed with color. "Will you walk home with me, Minnie?"

Minnie stood, smoothed her skirt and kissed Clara on the cheek. "Father will no doubt be looking for me. We will see you again in the morning."

Alone in her sitting room Clara started to pace again. It wasn't as satisfying as a real walk though. It was late afternoon but she had time for a walk in the gardens.

Thoughts raced in her head as she walked. So much that she barely noticed the flowers or the scents along the winding pathways. Poor Amy had endured a horrid fate at Henry's hands. What on earth did the two married women enjoy in his company? She had expected a miserable life as Henry's wife, but now that she knew more of his character she struggled to imagine the depth of cruelties he had planned for her. She shuddered, cold in spite of the still warm sun.

Dear Roland. Her heart fluttered again. She appreciated and admired him more than he knew. At least, he no longer needed to go through with the elopement he so rashly promised.

Her chest tightened and shoulders slumped as she neared the kitchen garden again. It took her a moment to articulate how she felt about that. Disappointed that she wasn't eloping with Roland, saddened and

frustrated that she had not thought of him as a potential husband until now. The emotions hit her hard and she clutched at her elbows.

“Clara.” Her father’s voice pulled her back from the depths she had fallen into. His face softened. “I missed you at lunch, will you be joining me for dinner?”

With reserves Clara didn’t realize she possessed, she straightened, gave him a slight nod and paced to the door.

Edna found her before she reached the stairs. “Let’s get you changed for dinner, love.”

Fiddlesticks. If Edna saw the state of affairs in her expression, then she was in a worse place than she thought. She took several deep breaths to calm her racing pulse. She had almost married a man with abusive tendencies. If they ever found the culprit, she needed to thank him.

But had she lost any chance of a happy future with Roland? Perhaps he saw as nothing more than a good friend. Or did the offer of elopement mean he felt something more?

Somehow, she kept her head up as she walked through the halls of her home. She couldn’t let her father know that she and Roland were investigating the crime, or he would never let him take her for a ride in his carriage.

Edna helped her change from the walking dress to a lilac gown more suitable for dinner.

She knew with all her heart that she would not have found companionship, like her father hoped, let alone love and happiness, with Henry. Perhaps once he achieved control of her through marriage he would have shipped her to an asylum saying that she suffered from melancholy. It wasn’t a ridiculous notion; the very thing happened to her cousin three years ago and the poor woman still languished in the Pennsylvania Hospital.

Dressed and ready to go down to dinner, Clara put on the face she wore for polite society. The half smile and slightly downcast gaze Grandma taught her many years ago fixed firmly on her face. No matter how many questions and emotions screeched for her attention, she could not give her father any clues she was interested in investigating with Roland.

Roland was taking her to the restaurant for brunch to help cheer her up. That’s all this outing was about. Clara gripped the banister as she walked downstairs, all the while giving herself a pep talk and

practicing how to word her request. If she didn't remember to tell her father the trip was with Roland *and* Minnie he would almost certainly say no, and that would not do.

“

I am so excited. After some persuasion, Father finally said yes. I can go to McGillian's Ale House tomorrow with Roland (and Minnie of course) and we will make further progress with our own private investigation into Mr. Henry Norris and all the people who might wish him dead. I can't wait for morning to arrive.

Clara's Journal, late Sunday night July 22, 1884

C

lara woke in a tangle of sheets, slick with sweat. It was four am, Monday morning. Barely thirty hours after Henry's murder upended her world.

No surprise that a nightmare invaded her sleep and she woke with a pounding pulse. But the detail in it shocked her to her core. She lit the lamp on her bedside table and swallowed hard. Nothing was amiss in her bedroom. It really was just a nightmare. She settled back against the pillows but left the light on.

She'd dreamed that she wed Henry in an extravagant white gown similar to the pink ball gown he sent her, but spiraled around her like a cage. They left the wedding breakfast in a carriage decorated in ribbons and flowers. Henry had forced a kiss upon her and then guffawed in laughter when she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

He'd not taken her home, but to a small town she didn't recognize. He'd pulled her from the carriage, dragged her to a central fountain, the largest she had ever seen, and pushed her into the churning water. Every time she tried to get up, the bustle and train kept dragging her back down. *So sad that my beautiful bride fell into a fountain and drowned on her wedding day.*

His words chilled her even more than the icy water, but he hadn't finished. He leaned forward, whispered *so lucky for me that all of the marriage certificates are signed*, and held her head under the water until

she gazed from above at her own still body.

When her pulse calmed, questions swirled in her head. What did the dream mean? She clambered from her bed to find the small book she'd found in her mother's library about how to interpret dreams. Resettled against the pillows she opened the book at the alphabetical list. "May as well start with my murder," she said to the silent room.

Her own murder suggested the severance of an important and significant relationship, and that she was trying to disconnect herself from her emotions. A fountain represented joy, renewed pleasure or increased sensitivity. Her own death symbolized inner changes, transformation and self-discovery.

The interpretation let her think about the nightmare in a different way. After all, a significant relationship with a man she detested had ended, she was trying to keep her emotions at bay, and she fervently hoped joy and pleasure were close at hand. Roland's smiling face came to her unbidden. Perhaps joy and pleasure would come from as close as next-door? She closed the book and settled to try and get a few more hours sleep. She didn't want to spend her outing yawning, especially not after her father so grudgingly agreed to it.

A knock woke her a few hours later and Edna tiptoed in. "Roland and Minnie are here. I've asked them to wait in the drawing room."

"What time is it?" Clara brushed stray strands of hair from her face. She must have looked a sight after her tussle with the sheets last night.

"It's almost ten."

Clara lurched upright. "I missed breakfast."

"Tea will be here shortly. I can organize a tray of breakfast if you like?" Edna's tone suggested she skip the tray and hurry to her waiting friends.

"Tea will be perfect, thank you. I'm running out of suitable clothing for this strange half mourning I'm doing." She sat at her dressing table as the tea arrived and her empty stomach let out a small growl. Roland had promised her brunch so she shouldn't have to wait long to eat. "Perhaps the black today as I'm visiting the town?"

"Or the lavender and black plaid? It is a few year's old but demure and lightweight. It's already fiercely warm outside."

"A good choice, I can wear the wide-brimmed straw hat decorated with lavender flowers and ribbon."

The familiar morning routine pushed all remaining memories of the nightmare away. Excitement at going out with Minnie and Roland, and continuing their investigation, buzzed in Clara's chest. She skipped down the stairs with a black parasol in hand and her notebook in her mourning bag over her wrist.

Her father met her at the front door and took Roland to one side for a few moments. Clara tried to eavesdrop, but they were talking too quietly and too far away to overhear what they were saying.

"I think I know what he is saying to Roland." Minnie sighed. "He's probably instructing Roland to be a perfect gentleman, to remember your status as a bereaved fiancé and not to tell you anything he may have learned from our father about this case."

"You are probably correct." Clara whispered back. "I do understand why he wants to protect me from the sordid details, but he should know me better."

"Your father is a man of stubborn breeding." Minnie gave Clara a smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. "What do you plan to do after you dine with Roland?"

Roland and her father joined them again before Clara could answer. Roland helped both Clara and Minnie into his waiting carriage under the watchful gaze of Mr. Penrose. Roland climbed inside and settled next to Minnie. They didn't start talking until they were well away from the Penrose Estate.

"What did my father want?"

Roland ran his hand across his jaw before glancing at Clara. "Mr. Penrose made it clear I am not to discuss my father's investigation with you at all. He made me give my word."

Clara shrugged. "I will not ask you to break your promise. When we bump into the businessmen you mentioned, I'm certain discussion will naturally fall to Henry's murder."

"You are both skilled at making people comfortable and encouraging them to open up to you." Minnie took a small mirror from her bag and checked her nose.

"Not a bit of shine." Clara squeezed Minnie's fingertips. "Have you heard from Samuel?"

Minnie swallowed hard and shook her head. "I'm sure he has his reasons." She turned her gaze out of the window and made it clear she did not want to discuss her missing fiancé further.

Clara's heart ached for her. Samuel had called on her almost every day since they started courting, his sudden disappearance did not make any sense at all. They fell into a tense silence. Clara wanted to ask Roland about Samuel, but couldn't very well do so in front of Minnie.

Minnie brightened as they neared Madame Dunbar's establishment and turned her gaze back to Clara. "I'm looking forward to seeing the finished outfits."

"I'm sure every outfit will look wonderful."

"Given the cost, they should." Roland elbowed his sister.

Minnie huffed. "Of course, she is not cheap. Madame Dunbar is one of the best society designers in Philadelphia."

"Ignore him, Minnie." Clara squeezed her fingertips again. With just a touch and her tone she tried to send Minnie her love, and prayers for her and Samuel's happiness, while talking about something else entirely. "She is an excellent designer I agree, and she hires the best seamstresses in the state. It is not easy to complete suitable outfits. They have to fit and flatter, subtly show your social position, and conform to the latest fashions."

"All without becoming too gaudy and giving the impression that I am shallow and overly interested in clothing. It is a careful balancing act, brother." Minnie elbowed Roland back. "I happen to know the fashionable suits you wear are not so different."

Roland held up one hand in surrender while he rubbed his side with the other, and his boisterous, boyish laughter filled the carriage. "I take it back sister, please no more pointy elbows."

She narrowed her eyes to answer back, but they stopped outside the dressmakers and Roland alighted to help Minnie out. When he climbed back in, he slid into the seat next to Clara.

As soon as the carriage moved again Clara blurted out, "Samuel?"

Roland took her hand in his. Something had changed between them, he'd offered her his arm and taken her hand often enough before, but even with two layers of gloves in between them the contact felt different now.

"This will be the fifth day we haven't seen or heard from Samuel."

"Five days?" Warmth drained from Clara's cheeks. "He said nothing about going away for so long?"

Roland shook his head. "Not a thing, in fact he had arranged to take

Minnie on a picnic exactly five days ago.”

“Poor Minnie, I am so caught up in my own drama I failed to see her anxiety and burden.”

Roland brought her hand to his lips and let them linger. She felt an insane urge to rip the silk lace glove off so she could feel his mouth against her bare skin. He spoke quietly as if to a frightened puppy. “I doubt she wanted to spoil your ball with her worry. It’s natural that your attention was fully devoted to the unwanted engagement as soon as you found out your father intended to announce it that night. Your concerns about the relationship were warranted.”

Nothing but excuses. Friends looked out for one another and she had failed Minnie. Fatigue settled over her in a rush. Clara tried and failed to hold back a yawn.

“Did you sleep well?” Roland looked at her with a gaze full of concern.

If any other man asked her such a question Clara might have blushed or huffed. But this was Roland. She angled herself toward him and swallowed, wanting to tell him about the dream and her interpretation of it.

“I woke at four am, shaking after a horrible dream.” She shuddered and took in a deep breath. “I watched myself marry Henry, then watched him murder me.”

“That was a nightmare, not a dream.” Roland drew her closer and kissed the top of her head.

She rested her head against his shoulder. “I looked up an interpretation in my mother’s old book. You remember the one we used to laugh at with Minnie while we were all still at school.”

“I do remember and you know that kind of thing is pure poppycock.”

“Maybe, maybe not, apparently after severing a significant relationship I can look forward to renewed joy and new beginnings.”

“I pray it is so.” Roland pulled away and sat opposite her again. “We are almost at our destination; let me tell you more fully about the gentlemen we will be meeting.”

“Yes, please, best to be prepared.” Clara focused on her hands instead of the face of which she had grown so fond.

“Mr. Elijah Robson and Mr. Grant Wigram are merchants from Boston, they invested heavily in one of Henry’s schemes in the iron and steel

industry, but they haven't received the paperwork they need to prove themselves creditors against his estate."

"Their names sound rather pompous." Clara let out a nervous giggle before schooling her face into a more serious demeanor. "They did not obtain assurances before parting with their money?"

"Apparently they believed verbal assurances from Henry and accepted some sort of certificate regarding their business relationship. But they fear it is not legally binding. The meeting with Henry was meant to finalize the details and complete paperwork."

"But the meeting didn't happen because someone murdered him." Clara let out a breath. "Then they are unlikely suspects. Henry's death doesn't help them at all."

"I think it is still worth talking to them. Information is as valuable as adding names to your suspect list."

She tugged on his hand. "It's our list."

Roland wriggled his brow in a theatrical manner. "Let's not rule them out in haste. I also heard that one of the men borrowed a significant sum from Henry, and part of the deal included the man's repayment of the debt in full."

"I find that hard to believe," Clara huffed. Extra suspects would be nice, but there had to be a good reason to add them to the list. "Henry was as unlikely to lend money as a scrooge on a bad day."

Roland laughed at that, and glanced out the window as if to check where they were and stared straight ahead humming a popular tune. Clara studied his profile. He'd tousled his hair by dragging his fingertips through it a few times. He was a fine-looking man from all angles, but even better than his adorable face, his beautiful soul shone in everything he did. His beauty shone from his intense, honest eyes and sounded in the tenderness of his voice; and equally from the generosity of his spirit and opinions, the protective touch of his hand, and the soft caress of his lips against her hair.

She'd watched Roland grow from a charming child, to an awkward teenager, and into adulthood as a confident and compassionate man.

He turned to face her. "What is wrong, Clara?"

"Nothing is wrong. Nothing more than we know of at least." She tried to cover the fact that she had been staring at him, but the heat in her cheeks and the stammer in her voice gave it away.

The twinkle in Roland's eyes suggested he realized she had just spent several long moments gazing at him, and he didn't mind one bit. Roland chuckled and patted her hand. "We are almost there."

Nervous butterflies took flight in the depths of her stomach. She took deep breaths to calm herself. Whatever horrors they discovered about Henry now, it was too late to harm her, and might be enough to divert suspicion away from her.

When the carriage stopped at the front of McGillians Ale House, a stable boy darted from the back of the restaurant to help their driver with the horses. Roland positioned his derby hat on his head and helped Clara to alight. Several of the guests already seated at tables near the paned windows glanced toward them. Clara held her head high.

Father hadn't announced the engagement, nor would he now. Unless they read every word of the *Philadelphia Times*, most people didn't know that she was in a state of pretend mourning for a fiancé she didn't want.

Unlike many restaurants in the town, this one sat ladies and couples in the bright and airy front half of the establishment, while confining the male-only area to a smaller space at the back.

"Shall we?" Roland pulled her hand into the crook of his arm.

"Are they already here?"

Roland glanced at his watch. "We are a few minutes early. Time to have a coffee, get comfortable and study the menu."

Clara brightened in anticipation; the restaurant had earned a well-deserved reputation for the coffee it served.

As soon as Roland opened the door, Clara inhaled the bright scent of freshly brewed coffee and ground beans, and the sweet scent of warm chocolate, combined with the tingle of spices. A huge menu board listed daily specials, but Clara gazed around with widened eyes. She had never been anywhere like it.

A long counter filled the wall opposite the window. Bean grinders, bottles of coffee flavorings and toppings, and coffee pots lined the shelves on one side of the menu board, a wall of labelled coffee bean drawers filled the other side. A jar labelled 'tips' was prominently placed next to a modern cash register that sat above a glass case full

of muffins, scones, sandwiches, pastries, and bagels.

A large man, his suit straining a little across his belly, strode toward them and shook Roland's hand. "Your table for four is ready, Mr. Fisher."

The man guided them to a low table closer to the counter than the window and slightly apart from the other diners. The tension across Clara's shoulders eased. Thank goodness, they wouldn't be seen from the window's. If anyone she knew saw her dining here, and told her father she was with two men he didn't know, he'd probably confine her to her rooms until his anger calmed. Roland pulled out one of the well-padded chairs and she sank into its comfort.

A smartly dressed waitress approached the table and gave Clara a small curtsy before turning to Roland. "Would you like to start with champagne, sir?"

He raised his brow at Clara.

She shook her head and ordered a milky coffee while Roland opted for ale. Clara removed her gloves and accepted a proffered menu with a smile. She was going to ignore the business part of this outing and concentrate on Roland, even if their main conversation revolved around the mystery of Henry's murder. It was so good to be out of the house and with him.

She leaned forward. "I will lay a bet that those business men will drink in relief at Henry's passing."

Roland shrugged. "As long as they get their money either returned or invested as they wanted. Otherwise they may try and drown their sorrows instead."

"I certainly hope they achieve a satisfactory outcome."

They sat close to one another rather than opposite, close enough for Roland to stretch his hand to hers and tease her fingers with a light touch. They ordered an intriguing sounding Spanish omelet to share when the waitress returned. They spoke of anything except Clara's debut ball, and Clara almost missed the two gentlemen who entered the restaurant and glanced around with a hungry stare.

A dark-haired stout gentleman, middle-aged but smartly dressed in a three-piece suit with a gold chain trailing across his vest, was followed by a slimmer, taller and younger man with hair as light as the other was dark.

"What an odd pair," Clara whispered.

Roland waved to them across the room and whispered back at the same time. “Even more so once you know them. You will see when we speak with them.”

The men neared the table at the same time the waitress approached with their meal. The omelet was served in the pan it was cooked in. The waitress returned with bread, salad and salsa and both men ordered ale. Roland stood to thank the men for meeting with them and to introduce both men to Clara. The stout gentleman was Mr. Elijah Robson, while the slimmer man introduced himself as Mr. Grant Wigram.

Clara helped herself to a portion of omelet, tasted it, forgot she was in polite company and let out a small moan.

Mr. Robson turned an unhealthy shade of red while Mr. Wigram laughed, though it was a mirthless sound. Clara’s cheeks heated and she coughed into her napkin to try and hide her discomfort. Roland came to her rescue and made small talk with the two men.

At a break in their conversation, Clara recovered her poise and gestured to the omelet. “Are you eating, gentlemen? This is delicious, and the bread is sweet and moist, I’m certain it was baked just this morning.”

Mr. Wigram gave her a nod. “We have already eaten, but please do not let us stop you from enjoying your meal.”

Clara had never tasted eggs cooked with potato before, and decided she would find a recipe for the dish so Cook could make it at home. She finished her portion—while Roland and the men discussed stocks and shares—with gusto she rarely exhibited in public.

She dabbed her lips with the napkin and sat back. The three men glanced at her.

Mr. Robson finished his ale and tapped a silk handkerchief to his lips. “I’m not sure how we can help you, Mr. Fisher, Miss Penrose.”

“Truthfully, I’m not sure myself.” Roland glanced at Clara before continuing, as if asking her permission to continue even though they both knew that society still expected well-bred ladies to defer to men, especially in serious conversation. She gave him a small nod and he crossed his legs and steepled his fingers on his knee.

“Miss Penrose’s father wished her to agree to wed Mr. Norris. It did not sit easy with her for a good many reasons.” Roland sounded every bit the calm and unflustered lawyer. “Fortunately, no announcement

was ever made public, but he died at Miss Penrose's debut ball and now rumors are circulating about his death."

"Murder. Let us be blunt. The rumors include at least one about your involvement in his demise." Mr. Wigram's direct gaze landed on Clara's face, and she very much wished he hadn't spoken again.

Her cheeks heated but she refused to lower her chin or her gaze.

"An accusation made by Sir Norris in the heat of his shock and grief." Roland gestured as if to wave the denunciation away as a trivial matter. It was unlikely that Sir Norris felt the same way. "Nevertheless, both Clara and I are very keen to see the questions resolved as quickly as possible."

Both men glanced at one another then between Roland and Clara as if trying to assess their relationship to one another.

Mr. Wigram crossed his legs in a slow deliberate motion. "Why not leave this to the authorities?"

"We have some concerns about process and progress." Roland jumped in to answer. "The police department is as corrupt as it is understaffed, and Both Sir Norris and the Chief of Police are high ranking freemasons."

"It is not so different in Boston." Mr. Robson smiled. "I trust your father has hired someone to prove your innocence, Miss Penrose?"

"Indeed, Mr. William Fisher." Clara felt Roland's knee through her skirts and she gave him a slight smile. "He is without a doubt the best private investigator in Philadelphia."

"Pinkerton trained in Chicago." Roland added with a proud smile.

Mr. Robson nodded. "So, I ask again how can we help you?"

"Any information you can give us about your business dealings with Henry could help us." Roland held his gaze without flinching. "I believe you will lodge your claim as creditors today?"

"It must have been very disappointing to almost reach the last hurdle for signed paperwork, only to have Henry get himself murdered the very night before the planned meeting." Clara sensed something off about the two. If she had to make a judgment on them, she would say they were as shady as she knew Henry to be.

Both men laughed, neither of them kindly, but it was Wigram who spoke. "Henry was never anything but trouble." His cultured tones fractured, but he quickly got himself under control. "Henry Norris was

a scoundrel who did anything he could to shaft his business partners and allies. He made sure he always came out on top, no matter what it cost others.”

“Why enter into a business arrangement with him at all?” Clara’s education and charity work left her with a good grasp of business basics and she found herself genuinely curious.

The two men glanced at one another again.

Mr. Robson circled his hand and gave her a smug simper. “It’s so difficult to explain these things to a lady.”

Before Clara could tell him exactly what she thought of that comment Roland leaned forward. “Does it have anything to do with your substantial debt to Henry Norris?”

Mr. Wigram sucked in his breath. He stilled his features again quickly but Clara had seen enough to decide it was he who had owed money to Henry, and that meant Henry must have had a good reason to lend to him, or stood a lot to gain.

“Was it a gambling debt, Mr. Wigram?” Clara laced her tone with honey, but kept a sharp stare on his face. “Was the money lent with an expectation that you would not only pay him back but invest money with him?”

“As delightful as it has been to meet you both.” Mr. Robson stood and balanced his hat on his head. “We really must leave to be on time to our next appointment.”

Mr. Wigram also stood and he followed Mr. Robson out without looking at Clara let alone answering her question.

“I cannot believe...” Roland let his words trail into the air as he shook his head. “Henry was a hard-hearted lover and a cold and calculating businessman who swam with sharks. He must have made a good many enemies.”

“Even more than I imagined.” Clara frowned at her empty cup. “I don’t trust either Mr. Robson or Mr. Wigram. I am adding both names to my list of suspects. Neither attended my ball, but I wonder if either knew one of the guests?”

Roland laughed as he stood and pointed toward the sign leading to the private facilities. “I will order us both a hot chocolate.”

“And a pastry please.”

“Your wish is my command, dear lady.” He kissed her bare knuckles

softly, the caress of his lips against her skin fast becoming one of her favorite gestures.

Alone at the table Grace pulled out her notebook, added the two businessmen to her suspect list and made a note of everything they'd learned. There wasn't much they could do to check the men's story's or dig for additional information.

Roland returned still rolling his hands together, the clean sharp scent of Ivory soap strong on his fingers.

Clara flashed him a smile. "We need to let your father know what we have discovered. He has the resources to check facts and he will uncover more information than we can."

"You are right." Roland ran his fingers through his thick waves. "But we have time for dessert before we collect Minnie."

The pastries and hot chocolate were delicious, a perfect ending to the meal. Roland's company had brought smiles and laughter to her lips, but it was time to put her serious hat on again. It seemed that the more they dug, the less reputable Henry showed himself to be.

Roland glanced at his watch. "Are you ready? We should go. We have one more errand before we can collect Minnie."

"Another errand?" Clara pulled on her gloves and let Roland lead her to the front of the restaurant.

Roland lowered his voice to a whisper as they waited for stable boy to bring round their carriage. "Father asked me to collect the preliminary autopsy report from a friend of mine who works at the coroner's office."

"It is ready so soon? I thought—"

"This is only the preliminary report, but father is thorough."

A chill settled on Clara's shoulders. The idea of the autopsy, the coroner cutting into Henry's body and looking for evidence to find the killer, brought her perilous situation into sharp relief. Would the police pounce as soon as they read the preliminary report, or would Roland's father exonerate her soon?

Not knowing what the report or her future held in store took Clara's good mood away, but she pushed the thoughts aside and cast a weak smile at Roland.

Time to cover her emotions with a mask of inscrutability.

“ *Let’s* walk to the morgue, it’s a short and shady amble through the park.” Roland lifted his brow in a question.

Clara nodded and some of the tension across her shoulders eased. Dear Roland, he always found a way to lift her mood when he noticed she needed a little help.

He sent the carriage on ahead and took her arm in his. She stopped to sniff every gardenia and rose bush they walked past, and Roland didn’t hurry her once. By the time they reached their destination the delightful scents and sunshine had worked a small miracle and calmed her fears.

The morgue was situated at the back of the police station, but had a separate entrance. As soon as Clara stepped inside, her nostrils twitched at the battle between the scents of antiseptic and bleach and the sickly sweet smell of death and the pungent odor of formaldehyde.

Roland greeted the man at the front desk, made arrangements to see his friend and sat next to Clara in the waiting room.

“Would you like to come through with me?”

She shook her head. No part of her wanted to get close to the room where they carried out procedures or see Henry dead or cut apart.

Roland patted her hand. “I will be as quick as I can.”

Alone in the waiting area, Clara found her notebook and her list of suspects. She added Robson and Wigram and considered the rest of the names: Sir Norris, Henry’s valet, Amy, Mr. Thomas, and Mr. Henshaw. She doubted Amy could have allied with anyone to murder Henry, but the others all deserved to stay on the list. As far as she knew the valet was still missing. Was it just her, or did anyone else think that was suspicious?

“Ready little one.” Roland’s voice startled her out of her thoughts. He waited while she packed her notebook back in her bag.

His driver spotted them as soon as they exited, touched his cap and

sped away to fetch the carriage.

Roland circled his arm around her waist and guided her away from the building. "We cannot talk here, but I admit I am troubled at the preliminary findings."

That explained the uncharacteristic tightness in his eyes. Her stomach clenched uncomfortably and she gripped her hands together at her waist to stop herself from fidgeting. She nodded and waited quietly at his side. In the carriage he sat opposite instead of next to her, and her dampened spirits weren't only from his concerned expression.

He pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket. "The coroner found poison in Henry's body, the actual poison not yet determined, but something that causes seizures."

"How horrible." Clara gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. No one, no matter how horrible they were to others, deserved to suffer seizures before they died.

"It gets worse, my sweet." Roland took her hand. "The coroner does not believe the amount of poison was enough to kill him. He has postulated that the poison was used to incapacitate him prior to stabbing him with a long, narrow blade, mostly point but with sharpened edges."

Clara blinked rapidly as she tried to process the news. Henry's murder was so much more horrible than she had imagined. Coldness expanded from her core and flowed into limbs that felt weak from exhaustion.

"I'm so sorry, Clara. I wish I could protect you from the ugly details, but I know you'd never forgive me if I kept you out of the investigation." Roland stroked his fingertip down the side of her face to her jaw.

His touch grounded her. She gripped his hand. "I will be fine, Roland. Thank you for giving me your respect and faith."

"Always. I know how often you are frustrated by condescending and self-important males." He gave her one of his dimpled smiles.

"Then tell me everything." Clara straightened and lifted her chin. She would have plenty of time to collapse after they uncovered the culprit.

Roland patted her hand and sat back. "He was stabbed three times, all wounds in his upper body and one of them hit a major artery. He would have died in minutes from massive internal and external bleeding."

“In summary then, he was poisoned by something that causes seizures, then stabbed three times with an extremely sharp, long, narrow blade. It doesn’t sound like a kitchen knife.”

“Not at all, the surgeon guessed at something like a small, slim dagger such as a poniard.”

“Could he tell at what time Henry died?”

“Not with any accuracy.” Roland sighed. “Sometime between mid-afternoon and late evening is the best they could offer.”

“The full report is still a few days away?”

He nodded. “We are almost at Madame Dunbar’s, do you want to share the information we have discovered with Minnie?”

“Yes, but not today, she will likely be in a happy mood.” The journey had passed with Clara barely noticing the movement of the carriage. “I don’t want to spoil it, especially not with her worry for Samuel.”

The carriage stopped and Roland alighted to collect Minnie and her parcels.

Nestled against the comfortable seat, with a blanket over her knees, Clara rested her head upon the padded leather and closed her eyes. Poisoned and stabbed. Henry’s death sounded like it belonged in a Shakespeare tragedy. Did the killer bring his own poison and weapon, or use whatever he found at hand? The gardener kept several poisons in a locked shed at the edge of the property. Cook probably had some in the cupboard under the sink.

Her eyes jolted open. And of course, there was Grandma Beth’s tincture. Water hemlock grew in a large barrel in the kitchen garden. Surrounded by a fence and signposted to warn of the dangers, anyone who saw it would know not to go near it. Unless, of course, they had a reason for wanting it. Grandma used it in very small doses for the migraine headaches that plagued her, but in larger doses it was known to cause seizures.

If someone had used water hemlock to poison Henry, he may not have noticed the sweet and pleasant carrot flavor, especially if it was hidden in his favorite whiskey, which he probably drank following the argument prior to the ball.

“What are you thinking, Clara?” Roland’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “You were miles away from us.”

“I thought you were ignoring me.” Minnie chuckled, and Clara

rejoiced at the sound of happiness in her tone. "I'm dying to hear all about your brunch and the mysterious businessmen."

Clara glanced at Roland before grabbing Minnie's hands. "Your news first, I can't wait to hear about the fittings and your new outfits."

Minnie launched into a description of soft cottons and tight bodices, a new summer hat covered in summer blooms, and the lightest weight, white, silk summer gloves.

Clara nodded, smiled and made encouraging comments, but her mind focused on the blade and another chill took over her body as she pictured her grandfather's wickedly sharp dagger. It was a family heirloom, passed to the oldest son in each generation, but as her mother was an only child like herself, her grandmother kept the dagger in a display case, waiting for a grandson to pass it onto.

She needed to talk this through with Roland, but should she tell his father? Not the police, she definitely wouldn't tell them about her involvement in this investigation, the water hemlock or the dagger. If they figured it for themselves she would call on her lifetime training to behave in a ladylike manner and eschew all knowledge of poisons and blades.

It sounded like a plan. Curse the stars. Why had she argued with Henry in front of so many witnesses? Why had she threatened him and made her distaste so obvious? Sir Norris wouldn't have thought of her as the culprit if neither had happened.

The carriage pulled to a stop at the gates to her estate, and Roland jumped out to open them.

"You are distracted." Minnie squeezed her fingertips. "Is what you discovered today of such concern?"

"Somewhat." Clara gave her a tight smile. "I will tell you soon, I promise."

At the porch to her home Roland helped her alight and walked her to the door. "We will work out who the culprit is, Clara. I give you my word."

"Your presence and support give me great comfort." She clung to his arm; she didn't want to let him go.

The look he gave her filled her stomach with butterflies, but she couldn't stop an acute sense of purpose focusing on her predicament. "We need to speak with your father. Come to dinner with us. Minnie as well, if she is able to."

“Good idea.” For a few seconds they gazed at one another’s lips. A desperate desire to taste his mouth consumed her.

The moment evaporated when her father opened the door. “Clara, Roland, Chief O’Connell visited earlier. I expect him to return tomorrow to interview you both.”

That couldn’t be good. Clara swallowed awkwardly. “I’ve invited Roland and Minnie to dinner, along with Mr. Fisher—”

“I invited Mr. and Mrs. Fisher after Chief O’Connell left. Roland and Minnie are also welcome, of course.”

The tension in Clara’s shoulders ratcheted up.

The Chief of Police in her own home, and coming back to interview her. First the hemlock in the garden, then Grandpa’s dagger, none of it bode well.

“Clara.” Roland’s whispered voice pulled her from her daze.

She suddenly realized that Father still stood in the doorway, staring at her with a confused expression. She’d never seen him open the door himself before. She still clung to Roland’s arm as if he were the only thing holding her up straight.

She shook her arm free. “Thank you, Roland.”

Roland turned aside so Father could not hear his whisper or see his lips move. “Do not worry, little one. I will always take care of you.”

Clara sucked in a breath and took a step toward her father while glancing at Roland. “I look forward to seeing you all at dinner.”

For the first time in her life, the house felt cold and unwelcoming as she took the stairs to her rooms. Somehow, she had to find the self-belief that she would find out the truth. She would succeed in helping to prove her own innocence and would power through any social reaction to the scandal now attached to her.

Her steps were heavy though. Even nearing her suite of rooms did nothing to give her a sense of sanctuary. At that moment, she did not know how she could escape the noose tightening around her.

“

I almost wish I didn't know the preliminary findings of the autopsy. It was bad enough that Henry got himself murdered in my home. But no he couldn't be happy with that could he. He had to attract both stabbing and poisoning to make sure the papers will gossip over every little detail. I'm not going to let myself think about Grandma's hemlock and Grandpa's dagger, at least not until this evening.

Clara's Journal, Monday afternoon, July 23, 1884

Roland arrived, alone, at seven that evening and asked Clara if she would like to walk in the gardens with him. Edna had helped her dress early and she had spent the last twenty minutes pacing in the library. A walk sounded perfect. A lump rose in her throat as soon as she saw him. The need to talk with him pulled on her heart. She yearned to tell him her fears, so he could soothe them away.

Arm in arm they paced to the rose garden. Unwanted tears stung at her eyes. She refused to let them fall in front of Roland, though she couldn't stop the tremors in her arms.

"What has distressed you?" Roland asked softly. "I mean, on top of the obvious."

"Do you remember the water hemlock in the garden, and Grandpa's dagger?"

"The plant behind a fence and almost hidden in the corner?" Roland scratched his chin. "I'm not sure I've ever seen your grandfather's dagger."

"Yes, exactly that plant." Unbidden, several tears rolled down her cheeks and she scrubbed them away with the back of her hand. "My grandma uses a tincture made from the juice for her headaches. Evans keeps the juice in his pantry, but she has a bottle of the tincture on her bedside table in case she awakes in pain during the night. The dagger is in a case in her room, and it is long, narrow and wickedly

sharp.”

“Never hide your tears or fears from me.” He stopped walking and faced her. “We have been friends for almost our entire lives. If you did not feel safe enough to cry around me, what kind of friend would that make me? In my opinion, not a good one.”

“You are the best friend I could have wished for.” She sniffled. Deep at her core she yearned to say more, but couldn’t find the words to explain her newfound feelings for him.

He ran his hands through his hair, took a step back and then toward her again. He seemed awkward and unsure of how to comfort her. “I want so badly to wrap my arms around you and make all of this go away.”

“I’m not sure you can do the latter Roland, but I would enjoy the former.”

He gave her a smile that spoke of honesty, concern and an earnest desire to please her. He pulled her to his chest and hugged his arms around her. She wrapped her own arms around his waist and clung to him as if she were a small child and he the largest bisque doll ever. His warm embrace seemed to offer her something more than just a shoulder to cry on. The tears renewed, and she let them fall as they pleased.

When her sobbing subsided he pressed a handkerchief into her hand and she wiped the wetness from her face. “I must look positively hideous.”

“You could never look hideous.” Roland lifted her chin to gaze at her. “I know today has uncovered some facts we might rather not face.”

Clara huffed out a long sigh. “My almost and deeply despised fiancé is dead. He was murdered in a most callous way, the tools of his murder sat in Grandma’s room the entire time, and Sir Norris accused me thanks to the heated argument before the ball. The Chief of Police wants to talk with me tomorrow and he will probably arrest me.” She gazed at the roses she might never see again and gripped Roland tighter. “Does that cover all of the facts we might rather not face?”

“Look at me.” Roland turned her toward him again. “I will not let anyone arrest you. Father will exonerate you. All of this evidence is circumstantial and Henry was not short of enemies.”

Roland spoke with more vehemence than she had ever heard before. He moved one of his hands from her shoulder to hold hers, and he

softly kissed her palm. "I have a feeling we have only just begun to find out who Henry really was, and that may scare you. Do not worry. Do not be frightened, Clara. I am here with you."

Even though her tears had stopped, she didn't want to pull away from Roland. The way he held her against his chest like she was the most important thing in the world, the way he had dropped everything to support her quest for information, the way he would give anything to make sure she was not falsely accused of murder; his actions spoke of his character and deep fondness for her.

He loosened his grip around her shoulders. "As much as I want to stay like this, I fear the reaction if anyone saw us."

She stepped back. He was right. Embracing a male, even such a close friend, was not proper at any time. And it was most improper a few days after the murder of her almost-fiancé. Her cheeks heated and before long her ears burned as much as her neck. Roland's cheeks were also tinged slightly pink.

She took a deep breath and the scent of his cologne, an earthy mix of musk and sandalwood, hit the back of her throat. It was the deep, manly smell she always associated with him. She realized with a jolt of surprise how much she liked it. How much she had always liked it.

"Thank you, Roland, for everything." She touched her fingertips to his jaw. "I am truly lucky to have you for my friend."

"As am I." He kissed her palm again. "We should probably get back. Father and Minnie should be here soon." He offered her his arm and they walked in silence back to the house.

The thought of the upcoming discussion left a sour taste in Clara's mouth. Her father would be angry with her for presuming to involve herself in the investigation. Roland's father could be angry with both of them. At least they had kept Minnie away from the worst of it, and with both their fathers and Mrs. Fisher involved, the conversation should stay civil. She crossed her fingers in the folds of her skirt, hopefully the discoveries helped to identify the real culprit and her involvement would be forgotten.

As they crossed the kitchen garden she couldn't help glancing at the hemlock plant, verdant and flourishing as if to spite her. She lifted her chin to enter the house with her head held high and comforted herself with the thought that no matter what, the situation could not worsen.

Evans greeted Clara and Roland at the kitchen door to the Penrose mansion. "Forgive me for pouncing on you, Miss." He dipped his head slightly. "Your father needs you in the sitting room rather urgently."

"Is he all right?" Clara clutched Roland's arm.

"Two men from the police department are with him."

For a few seconds, Clara couldn't breathe. An almost overpowering fear raised thoughts of running away, maybe eloping with Roland, or claiming an acute migraine and collapsing prostrate on the floor. She stomped the thoughts down. No, she was stronger than that and she had done nothing wrong. She would face these foes as she had been raised and overcome this obstacle head on with impeccable elegance.

Evans had lowered his voice, but the kitchen was unusually quiet, the staff clearly listening. Knowing that any investigator with an ounce of experience would talk with staff first, and someone always gave information away, Clara kept her head high and her face neutral.

"Then we must hurry, thank you Evans. Has Father asked for tea?"

"He took a whiskey for himself. I don't believe the policemen are drinking. Can I bring you something, Miss?"

"Perhaps a sherry as it is so close to dinner. Roland?"

"I can wait—" Roland lowered his head to whisper to her.

"I'd rather you joined us." Clara squeezed his arm again. She'd succeeded in tamping her fearful thoughts down, but they weren't far below the surface. She needed Roland at her side.

"Then, a whiskey for me." He covered her hand with his and gave her a look that told her he would support her no matter what.

They hurried to the front of the house and entered the sitting room

without knocking.

Father stood at the mantle, swirling a whiskey in one of his crystal glasses. A uniformed trooper sat on an uncomfortable straight-back chair with a notepad in hand and a short pencil in his mouth. A third man, the insignia of a Sergeant on his shirt sleeves, balanced with his feet shoulder-width apart and frowned at no one in particular in the middle of the room.

"You needed to see me, Father?" Clara nodded her head at the standing gentleman and perched herself on the edge of a chair.

"Sergeant Davies has information to share with us, and a number of questions for you." Her father gestured toward the man, and the fact that he did not properly introduce the stranger to her showed how deeply this visit disturbed him. "I was not prepared to allow these men to question you alone so I suggested they wait for you to return so we could do this interview now."

Clara's stomach knotted again. She smoothed her skirts and marveled at the stillness of her hands. "We are about to dine with friends, will this take long?" The haughty and imperious tone Grandma Beth taught her came from her mouth with practiced ease.

Roland sat in the matching chair next to Clara; almost close enough to touch, far enough away that she wouldn't embarrass herself by snatching Roland's hand during her interrogation. She had no doubt the Sergeant intended to question her thoroughly regardless of who else watched. Evans entered with their drinks and placed them on the small malachite table in between the two chairs. Her father did not offer either of their police visitors anything to drink.

"We just need a few minutes of your time, Miss Penrose. We appreciate your assistance into our enquiry into the death of Mr. Norris." The Sergeant held her stare.

She won the no blinking contest. "I am sure we are all eager to hear the information you have uncovered."

Sergeant Davies clasped his hands in front of him while the trooper licked his pencil in preparation to record her words, perhaps her reactions. "Your father informs me that he meant to announce your engagement to Mr. Norris at the ball. Were you happy with that, Miss Penrose?"

"No, I was not, and both my father and Mr. Norris knew it. I would certainly not commit murder to escape the fate."

“What is the meaning of this, Sergeant?” Roland leaned forward as if to spring from the chair in her defense.

Clara’s chest relaxed a little. Thank goodness he was with her when the summons to the sitting room came.

“I’m not saying Miss Penrose committed any crime.” The Sergeant was unaffected by the animosity in Roland’s tone. “But we do need to get a few things straight.”

She gave him a slow nod to give her approval to proceed. Roland picked up his whiskey and swirled it rather like her father did. She needed to focus, and not jump in to answer questions the Sergeant hadn’t asked yet. She had to make sure she didn’t give them any information they didn’t already have. She returned her attention to the patiently waiting Sergeant.

“Where were you from the end of your argument with Mr. Norris and your appearance at the ball?” His voice was deceptively innocent. Perhaps he expected Clara to react to hearing that he knew about the argument? If so, she no doubt disappointed him with her carefully schooled features.

“I immediately returned to my room, where I wrote in my diary until Minnie arrived.” She couldn’t let them find the thankfully well hidden, diary. Apart from pure embarrassment at strangers reading her deepest, darkest secrets, she couldn’t remember exactly what she’d written about Henry. Hard to imagine any of the words voiced a good opinion of him.

“Did you notice the time when you entered your room?”

“I did not, but it must have been only a minute or so after leaving the ballroom.” Clara wasn’t sure whether to be thankful or worried that the autopsy report couldn’t narrow down the time Henry died, so she decided to ignore it.

“Are you aware that a very poisonous plant grows in your garden?” Sergeant Davies glanced at the trooper at the end of the question as if to make sure he was poised to take everything down.

“You must be more specific, we have a large selection of rare and unusual plants.”

“Is cowbane one of them?”

Cowbane was the local name for the deadly water hemlock plant thanks to its danger to farm animals. It had been too much to hope that the shrub went unnoticed, so that just left honesty. “Of course,

my grandmother uses a weak tincture to help relieve migraine headaches. Do you need a recipe for its preparation, Sergeant?"

He shook his head, but then seemed to change his mind. "That might be helpful, thank you."

"How is my grandmother's tincture related to Henry's death?"

"I trust it is not. However we have received a preliminary report from the coroner that suggests Mr. Norris suffered seizures brought on by a poison, prior to succumbing to a stab wound to his torso."

Clara didn't need to act horrified. "How dreadful. Does Sir Norris know?"

"He does, and he insists we continue to investigate the occupants of this house."

"Ridiculous." Roland and her father said together.

"We would investigate this household regardless of Sir Norris. It is after all where Mr. Norris met his end."

It was better than being the sole center of attention, but Clara didn't want any of the people she cared about under suspicion.

The Sergeant turned his attention back to her. "Are you aware your grandmother kept a dagger in a glass case in her rooms?"

Clara's throat caught and her heart sank. That was the one knife in the entire home that she hoped would not be mentioned at all. "I do. Grandpa was very proud of it and Grandma looks after it out of respect for him and a care for future generations."

"I understand you will inherit this dagger when your grandmother passes."

"I will, and I will also guard it for a future son or grandson."

"As I told you earlier." Mr. Penrose crossed the room to stand beside Clara and squeezed her shoulder. "Clara has no idea what these items have to do with Henry's death, and they are items anyone on this estate has access to. We warn all servants and guests of the dangerous properties of water hemlock, and my mother-in-law has never hidden the display case containing her late husband's poniard."

"Unfortunately the weapon was not hidden on the evening of your ball, Miss Penrose." Sergeant Davies stared at Clara with an unnerving intensity. "We now have two pieces of evidence linking this house to the murder." He gestured to the trooper.

The trooper yanked a bag from beneath the seat, took out a blanket-wrapped item and peeled back the covering.

Clara gasped and jammed her hand over her mouth.

Rusty red stains enveloped the usually pristine blade, but there was no doubting it was Grandpa's dagger. Roland sucked in a breath and she wanted to catch his expression, but she couldn't turn her gaze from the bloodied weapon to glance at him.

"We found this in the gardens, behind the barrel containing the cowbane." Sergeant Davies folded his arms across his chest. "We have been told that your grandmother does not leave her rooms after retiring, and she retired early on the night of the ball due to an unusually bad migraine."

The implication was clear. Someone must have snuck into her room before she retired, taken the knife and used it to kill Henry, and maybe took the tincture from her bedside table before she could drink it as well. Grandma Beth always warned that any more than a single drop could be fatal. Which did suggest the killer knew more than a little about the estate and its inhabitants. Clara lifted her hand and covered her father's fingertips. Somehow the hard facts sounded even worse when so baldly stated by the police.

The sitting room door swung open and Clara jolted. Her father squeezed harder to steady her, or perhaps to keep her in the seat.

Roland's father strode into the room and faced off with the Sergeant. "What the devil is going on, Davies?"

Minnie and her mother darted in behind him and took a position next to Roland.

Sergeant Davies glanced at each of their faces as if sizing up the opposition. "Routine questioning of a—"

"Out now." At the commanding tone in Mr. Fisher's voice, Clara jolted again.

The Sergeant's face reddened, but he gave both Mr. Fisher and Mr. Penrose a slight bow before nodding at the trooper and leaving the room.

Evans must have been waiting in the hall with their hats, as the front door closed a few seconds later. He stepped gracefully into the sitting room. "Shall I ask Cook to push dinner back by fifteen minutes, sir?"

Clara's father gave her shoulder another quick squeeze before pacing

to Roland's father and shaking his hand. "Fifteen minutes will be perfect, thank you Evans."

He returned moments later with a whiskey for Mr. Fisher and sherry for Minnie and her mother.

"That horrid man was about to say *questioning of a suspect*, wasn't he?" Clara kept a tremor from her voice but couldn't stop herself from standing and pacing to the window.

Roland escorted his mother and sister to the high backed sofa opposite the fire and joined Clara at the window.

"I didn't realize you had such influence over the police force, William." Clara's father gestured to the armchairs on either side of the fireplace, and the two older men settled into them to sip their drinks.

"Precious little influence unfortunately, but Chief O'Connell does owe me a few favors and he promised to inform me of any interviews so I could attend." Roland's father massaged his forehead with a gesture Clara recognized all too well as signifying the onset of a headache. "Yes, Clara, I believe you are right."

She stared out the window, her pulse racing. That made it official. The police seriously considered her a suspect for the brutal crime.

Clara stood as if frozen, still staring out the window, but seeing nothing of the garden. If the nightingales still sang their dusk chorus she couldn't hear it, her pulse pounding in her ears drowned out all other sounds. It shouldn't have been such a surprise, but knowing that not just Sir Norris but the police seriously considered her a suspect for the brutal crime hit Clara hard.

Roland clasped her hand in his. "Breathe, little one."

The breath of air across her cheek broke the spell holding Clara trapped in her own head. She sucked in a lungful of air and hid their intertwined fingers in the folds of her gown.

"Damnation." Clara's father slammed his glass on the side table next to his chair. "I will not have my daughter treated like a common criminal."

Clara jolted and tightened her grip on Roland's hand. Father rarely cursed in front of her, and never in mixed company like this. His concern added another layer to her fears about the evidence and where it pointed.

"The Mayor is at the top of the pecking order in this city and he uses the Police Department to do two things: cement the political machine, and maintain profitable contacts with the criminal underworld, especially the vice syndicates in gambling and prostitution." Bitterness laced Mr. Fisher's words. "A random local murder would normally be little more than a blip on the horizon. Unfortunately, Sir Norris and Chief O'Connell are close."

"Too close." Clara's father responded. "I will speak with the Mayor. You keep working on the Police Chief."

Mr. Fisher glanced at his son. "Let's share the information we have."

Roland turned to face the room again and Clara turned with him. He cleared his throat and gave an admirably accurate and concise

summary of everything they had learned. He would make a fine lawyer when he finished his clerkship at the end of this year.

“Clara Elizabeth Penrose.” Father pressed his hand to his forehead. “What part of ‘stay in your rooms and do not draw attention to yourself’ did you not understand?”

Roland stepped forward, placing his body between Clara and her father. “Sir—“

Her father pointed a finger at Roland’s chest. “Clearly you have aided and abetted my daughter in her foolish disobedience.”

Clara stepped around Roland. She would not let him take any of the blame that was rightfully hers to bear. “Father, I cannot sit on my hands all day while people suspect me of killing Henry.”

“You can and you will. Your meddling is only attracting unwanted attention to your motives.”

“Father—“

“That is the end of this discussion.” He narrowed his eyes, his expression pinched.

Clara gave silent thanks that there wasn’t an outside lock on her bedroom door. With the disappointment and annoyance radiating from her father, she had no doubt he would lock her in to keep her out of any more trouble.

Evans returned to let them know that dinner was ready. After an awkward moment, Mr. Penrose gestured for the ladies to precede him to the dining room. With a half smile, Roland held out his arm to walk Clara into dinner, Minnie grabbed hold of his other arm and they paced to the dining room together. Not quite linked with the spirit of the three musketeers, Clara was too raw to embody such energy and courage, but the clear support of her two best friends started soothing the tension that had flooded her body.

Once seated, Clara turned to her father. “May we continue to discuss this issue? I know it is not normal dinner conversation.”

“I also have information to share.” Mr. Fisher sat back as a servant placed a bowl of soup in front of him. “Important information, I’m afraid.”

“Murder is hardly a polite topic of conversation in mixed company.” Mr. Penrose let out a pained sigh and glanced at Mrs. Fisher.

She took a dainty sip of wine. “Murder itself is not polite, nor is the

accusation hanging over Clara's head."

With a nod, her father gestured his hand in a circle. "Clara's safety is my first priority. Given the time-frame, and as it's clear both she and Minnie have vigorously busied themselves with inappropriate details of Henry's life and death, I admit I see no reason not to proceed."

Mr. Fisher acknowledged Clara and her father with a nod. "I regret to inform you that Henry Norris was not the only person to experience ill effects at or after the ball; several guests have fallen ill. Grace Stotesbury appears to be the worst affected, at one stage her doctor feared for her life."

"That fear has passed?" Clara dropped her spoon and it clattered against the rim of her soup bowl.

"She is not out of danger, but the doctor is more optimistic."

"Poor Grace." Minnie gasped. "I called on her yesterday and her maid let me know she was too poorly to receive me. But I had no idea her illness might be related to..." She swallowed as she gazed at her father.

"The poor girl, we must both call on her tomorrow, Minnie."

"Yes, mama." Minnie dropped her gaze to the tablecloth.

Clara wished she could reach her friend to comfort her. She tried to maintain a civil relationship with Grace thanks to their shared charity work, but Minnie was trying to build an appropriate sister-in-law relationship with the girl, thanks to her engagement with Samuel. Clara sucked in a breath as a sharp pain cleaved her chest. If Roland disappeared she would go insane with worry. Dearest Minnie must have visited Samuel's home to try and find him, only to fail. Heaven only knew the depth of her pain.

"I believe you confronted Grace in the ballroom." Mr. Fisher made his words a statement, not a question, and directed them to Clara.

She focused on him again. She hadn't expected to keep that little tête-à-tête secret. Mr. Fisher would have spoken with most of the guests and staff. She'd had more arguments on the day of her debut than in the last year. It was no wonder her father worried that a reputation as a harridan might stick to her like liquid glue.

"It is true. I saw her putting something into the punch from the balcony." Clara closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. An oppressive weight almost forced her shoulders into a deep slump. She didn't want to relive the arguments that led up to the ball, or the confrontation

with Grace just before a scream alerted them that someone had discovered Henry's body.

Roland stretched his fingertips to Clara's under the table; she cast a silent prayer of thanks that he sat next to rather than opposite her. She drew both comfort and strength from his touch.

She opened her eyes and straightened her back. "I saw what Grace and her coterie did from my hiding spot. One of the women distracted the servant on duty, while another added a green liquid from two bottles to the punch bowl."

"Absinthe, in my punch?" Her father raised his voice. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because our attention has been rather distracted by Henry's murder and the fact I appear to be the main suspect." Clara fired back. Her tone was far too strident for the dinner table but she didn't feel like apologizing.

"Continue please, Miss Penrose," Mr. Fisher said.

"Grace knows full well that Father is a leader in the temperance movement." Clara clasped Roland's fingertips harder. "Grace chose to embarrass us both with malicious intent. I wasn't about to let that happen. I raced through the service hallway and arrived in time to grab her arm. I've no idea how often-snide-Grace and always-charming-Samuel are siblings."

Minnie stiffened at the mention of her fiancé.

Clara's heart went out to her friend, but she focused on continuing her story. "While I argued with Grace, numerous people filled cups with the spiked punch. Grace denied it, but I asked the servant to taste it and he confirmed the unmistakable hints of anise and fennel. I was about to throw her out when we heard the scream."

The scream that started this whole mess.

"How can the two incidents be linked? Henry Norris did not grace the ballroom with his presence." Roland spoke as the soup dishes were cleared. "If someone laced the punch with hemlock, it is likely some of the guests who drank it would be worse than ill."

Clara nodded. "It's a strong poison, two cups of adulterated punch instead of one could be enough to kill rather than sicken."

"Miss Stotesbury's symptoms mirror those associated with poisoning by water hemlock. She is still experiencing mild seizures and muscle

weakness. Her symptoms have the police looking at connections. One of the senior officers told me that one theory is the killer added poison to the punch to make Henry's death look like accidental poisoning."

"That theory does not explain Henry's murder. Why stab him if the killer intended to poison him?" Roland seemed to ask himself as much as the people at dinner.

"One thing I do not understand." Minnie rested her hands on the table. "What did Grace have to gain?"

Clara shrugged. "If she did poison as well as spike the punch, does that mean Grace deliberately drank enough to make herself so ill? I just can't see Grace doing that. Causing a few tipsy guests to embarrass Father yes, but harming others and making herself seriously ill?" Clara shook her head. "It's more likely the poisoner is someone other than Grace."

Everything seemed to point to someone in the Penrose household, or someone who was a frequent enough visitor to know about Grandma Beth's tincture and the dagger. Some of the suspects on her list were becoming less and less likely. The two cuckolded husbands for example, and the two businessmen who held grudges. Who was left? The valet, Sir Norris, and the maid Amy.

"Clara." Roland's grip tightened on her fingers.

She glanced at him and around the dining table. Everyone except herself had his or her fish course in place on the table. She became aware of the servant standing next to her chair and moved so he could place a plate in front of her. Unfortunately, her appetite had vanished. She didn't want to let go of Roland's hand to pretend to eat, but slowly she uncurled her fingers from his.

The lack of contact caused a physical pain and she couldn't fill her lungs. It was as if he had become as necessary to her as air to breathe.

Apart from the occasional mention of eloping, she and Roland hadn't discussed what the future might hold for them. One thing for certain, if she didn't hang for murder, she needed to sort out her feelings for Roland and clarify how he felt about her.

That's *if* she didn't hang for murder.

“

What a day! At one point, with Roland's arms around me, I felt a rare and pure joy. But then the police, that horrid man, he let Grandpa's bloodied dagger just fall in front of me. I can feel a noose tightening around my neck. All the evidence points to someone either living in this house or close to the household. Who but me wanted to be rid of my odious almost fiancé? Who but me indeed? It is no wonder I am the chief suspect.

Clara's Journal, very late Monday, July 23, 1884

T

uesday morning, and it dawned the third day since Henry's murder rocked Clara's world. She'd forgotten to draw her curtains before clambering into her bed and sunlight woke her not long after sunrise.

She stretched and rang for Edna. Might as well breakfast, dress for the day and work through the information she and Roland had discovered to try and work out who killed Henry. The only way to make sure the noose didn't tighten around her neck was to find the culprit.

Father left before dawn for his monthly business journey to New York. He'd wavered about going, but after their dinner guests left the previous night, he declared his intention to make the trip as usual. He'd given her strict instructions to stay home and 'do needlepoint or whatever it is that amuses young ladies these days'. He was decades out of date. Clara did not know a single woman who sat at home all day with a needle and thread.

Edna found another old dress in her closet. A plain, high-necked day dress in a forest green and navy check seersucker. With her hair braided and twisted into a bun, she looked somber but not heartbroken.

"Perfect. Thank you Edna." She caught Edna's gaze in the mirror. "I need you to do a favor for me."

Edna raised her eyebrows. "I will, if I can."

"I'd like to look at the last few days editions of the newspaper. I know Evans keeps them in his pantry."

"You also know your father does not like you reading the *Philadelphia Times*."

"He is excruciatingly old fashioned, and what he doesn't know won't hurt either of us."

Edna shook her head, but didn't refuse.

"I will take a breakfast tray in the library." Maybe the walls of books and the serious looking desk and chair would inspire her.

"One breakfast tray, several newspapers and a serve of sass coming right up, Miss Clara."

Clara descended the stairs with a grin on her face. If anyone knew about sass it was her maid Edna.

AT A KNOCK on the library door Clara scooped the papers into a bundle and stuffed them in the bottom drawer of the desk.

Evans entered with his expression pinched. "You have a visitor. I have put him in the sitting room."

A visitor, a man? Clara rose and followed Evans from the room. "Who is it? Please ask Edna to join me."

He gave her a hard to interpret look but also nodded. "It is Mr. Fisher. I will send Edna with a tea tray."

Clara's stomach sank. Did he want to question her again? It must be something serious to arrive without warning and knowing that her father was away.

She stepped into the sitting room with head held high. "Roland." With a grin she darted to him and took his hand. "I feared it was your father with bad news. Have you come to help me sleuth from home? I've been reading forbidden newspapers in the library."

A blush flared in his cheeks and for a few moments he looked as adorable as the little boy she remembered. He kissed her hand and guided her to a chair.

He sat close but not touching. "You look and sound well. You slept despite everything that happened yesterday?"

"Surprisingly, yes. I expected to toss and turn with nightmares about poison and bloodied daggers but I fell asleep like an innocent."

Despite a niggling worry about the police questioning and suspecting her, and about the connections to her dreadfully ill Grandma, she'd also woken refreshed and ready to face the world with a steely glint in her eye.

"I fear I am here to corrupt you." His face grew serious, his eyes hardened.

She clutched her hand to her chest. "You are the most honorable man I know."

He shook his head. "You may throw me out on my ear after I say my piece."

Clara's heart hammered. Was he about to say goodbye, say he'd changed his mind and didn't want to elope with her? Or tell her that police were on their way to arrest her and he could no longer help her. No, she could not believe any of that. Roland would never hurt her. "Then say it, and let us see."

Edna arrived with tea and freshly made sweet pastries. "You would like me to stay, Miss?"

"It would be for the best I think." Clara took her gaze off Roland to smile at Edna. She might be entirely comfortable alone with Roland, but many other people, including both their fathers, would no doubt be horrified.

Edna found a seat at the opposite end of the room, pulled a basket of darning close and concentrated on needlework.

Clara poured tea and bit into one of the delicious apple-filled pastries that Cook made for her. "Minnie couldn't come with you today?"

"She and Mother went to see Grace again. Apparently she is getting better and is ready for visitors."

"Has she heard from Samuel?" A spark of hope lifted her voice.

He shook his head. "But the huge hug and pep talk you gave her last night seemed to lift her spirits."

"I'm glad for that, but we must do something about Samuel."

Roland lifted his brows. "Like what?"

"Find him." Clara offered Roland another pastry. "If he has abandoned Minnie without even the courtesy of breaking their engagement to her face, I will personally hunt him down and chop off his manhood with blunt scissors."

“We will find him, I promise. If he has abandoned Minnie I will hold him down for you while you chop, chop, chop.” Roland scissored his fingers to emphasis each chop. His soft blue eyes shone with a piercing, intense stare and his gaze hardened again. “But you are my priority until the real culprit is found and we can breathe easy again.”

Clara nodded her understanding. As much as she wanted to help Minnie find Samuel, she knew she had to free herself from the yoke of suspicion before she could be of service to anyone.

“Do you remember the maid Amy?”

“Of course, I feel terrible for the poor thing.” Clara set her cup down

“She is back working at the Norris estate.”

“How do you know that?”

Roland tapped his nose like he had a few days ago.

Clara rolled her eyes. “A gentleman must protect his sources, I remember.”

“I sent word that we would like to speak with her, and she responded early this morning with her agreement to an interview.”

“We? An interview?” Clara glanced at Edna. She hadn’t exactly promised to stay in her room, but Edna had heard her grumbling last night, and everyone in the house knew she was expected to behave and that meant staying at home.

“We will have to go to her unfortunately, she won’t have a day off until next week, but Sir Norris will be absent all day.” Roland held his hand to his heart. “I thought about going by myself, but she may respond better to a woman. Besides I knew you would want to come with me.” He winked at her.

“I do. Father will have kittens when he returns and finds out. But I can’t just sit here waiting for men, not even good men like you and your father, to try and save me.” She stood and wiped her knuckle across his cheek. “Thank you.”

“Edna.” She paced to where Edna pretended to focus on her mending. “I’m sure you heard. I think it best if you come along to chaperone me.”

“I doubt that my company will calm your father, but of course I will accompany you. I’ll fetch our wraps and hats.”

She left the door slightly ajar as was proper, but with Edna gone,

Clara and Roland were alone again. He stood in front of her and gripped her shoulders. "I understand if you would prefer to stay home, rather than incur your father's wrath when he discovers you have accompanied me to visit with the Norris servants."

"I don't want to. But thank you for giving me the choice."

He kissed her cheek. Clara did not know what to do with her hands. She ached to touch him, but how? She raised one hand to his shoulder, as if readying herself for a waltz. He moved one hand to the small of her back in response and pulled her a little closer. Clara could not take her gaze from his generous, smooth, lips. What would it be like to kiss him, to be kissed?

"Is there time for dancing?" Edna returned with wraps, bags, parasols, hats and several chuckles.

Roland pulled away, but his face was lit up in a genuine smile. "No, we should be on our way."

Outside the sun shone and the horse's coats gleamed. Roland helped Clara into the carriage and then Edna. Edna sat opposite Clara with a smirk on her face.

Roland climbed in, dithered for a second, then sat next to Clara.

Clara took his arm. "I could never have so much success looking into this myself, Roland. I am indebted to you."

"No debt." Roland patted her hand. "You mean more to me than any and every one else I know. It is my pleasure to assist you in any way I can."

"You are truly a good friend. I am the lucky one."

Sitting in the carriage with him like this, their arms linked, their shoulders and hips touching, held an invigorating thrill. Riding with Henry had never been so reassuring and electrifying at the same time. She hadn't suffered Henry pawing at her, but if he deigned to speak to her, he dominated the conversation, as if she was just there to be talked at.

With Roland, she talked with him and he talked with her, he waited for her to respond before continuing his own thoughts as if none other mattered. He wanted to hear her thoughts and opinions and they discussed such a broad range of topics.

She appreciated it.

She didn't tell him often enough though. She swiveled a little so that

their knees also touched. Roland mirrored her move so they angled toward one another.

"You and Minnie are my closest friends. If not for you I would have been in purgatory since Henry was murdered." She tried to make her eyes say *especially you*.

"I treasure our relationship." Roland lifted her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles.

"Did you worry about what would happen to our relationship if I married Henry?" Clara whispered, though inside the small carriage it was unlikely Edna wouldn't hear her words.

"Yes." Roland sighed. "Henry would expect, maybe demand, that you distance yourself from any males you befriended prior to the marriage. I expect he would have moved you to his townhouse in the city. Too far away to bump into one another on a morning stroll."

"I was worried also." She gave him a slight smile as they rolled to a stop in front of Sir Norris' home.

Edna gazed at the imposing building. "Shall I wait in the carriage or dart to the kitchen door and see if I can scrounge a cup of tea plus an earful of gossip?"

Clara took a deep breath. "Definitely the latter, thank you Edna."

The knot in Clara's stomach tightened as she and Roland paced to the front door arm in arm and Edna followed the side path to the back of the house. At home, the thought of meeting with Amy had filled her with hope. Now that she was so close, her throat dried and the sound of her pulse hammered in her ears.

What if Sir Norris was home after all? Did he still believe her guilty? He may have threatened his staff and told them not to speak with either her or Roland. Amy could be taking a huge risk in talking with them. Clara pulled on Roland's arm to tell him she had changed her mind, but it was too late, the door opened to reveal the butler's scornful face.

"Sir Norris is not home." The butler pushed the door to close it.

Roland thrust his foot in the doorway. "We are here to speak with one of your maids. The meeting was approved by the housekeeper."

The butler's eyes narrowed and his expression tightened. "Then your business is at the kitchen door, not here." He gave Roland's ankle a savage kick and slammed the door in their faces.

“*B*rute.” Clara shouted through the letterbox at Sir Norris’s

residence, and then turned to face Roland with a chuckle. “That was not at all ladylike.”

Roland rubbed at his ankle. “No, but that butler deserves the nickname.”

“Can you hobble to the back of the house?”

Roland tested his weight on his leg. “It throbs, but holds me upright. Just don’t go sprinting anywhere.”

She took his arm again and tried to take some of his weight. It was slow going, but they made it to the back of the house. Two young maids, sleeves rolled up and caps askew, were beating rugs. They stopped when they saw Clara and Roland and dropped into awkward curtsies.

The oldest girl darted inside and moments later a large, flame-haired woman in a flour-covered apron appeared. “You will be Miss Penrose and Mr. Fisher to see Amy, I’ll warrant.”

When Clara nodded, the woman motioned for them go ahead along a narrow hallway. They soon found a bright, airy, kitchen full of people baking and with Edna sitting at the long table with a cup of tea in her hand.

“You were right, Mrs. Goins.” Edna grinned up at Clara. “Sour-face didn’t let them in through the front door.”

The cook nudged one of the girls sifting flour. “Wipe your hands and go find Amy for us, love. She should be finished in the bedrooms by now.”

“Mrs. Goins?” Clara held her hand out to the woman who had let them in. “Thank you for permitting us to speak with Amy.”

The woman nodded and wiped her hands before briefly squeezing

Clara's outstretched fingertips. "She's a good girl, deserves better." Mrs. Goins motioned to a door almost hidden in a dark alcove. "You can use my pantry."

She let them into a decent size room overlooking a small kitchen garden and closed the door behind her leaving them alone.

Roland dropped onto the sofa with a sigh.

Clara paced between the window and the opposite wall.

"My ankle is throbbing harder just from watching you."

"I'm sorry. My heart is pounding so fast I can't keep still."

"You have nothing to fear from Amy, and I will protect you from the sour-faced butler."

That drew a small chuckle from Clara. "I didn't do right by her, Roland, and it's eating me alive."

Clara fidgeted with the cameo at her throat. Amy had been shy and withdrawn when she worked at the Penrose home; Henry's bullying and abuse couldn't have helped her. What would she be like now, not physically but mentally and emotionally?

"You have nothing to feel guilty for, my sweet." Roland caught her hand as she swept past him.

"Except I saw bruises on her arms and I chose to believe her when she told me her own clumsiness—"

The door opened and Amy trudged into the room with a tea tray laden with tea and fresh buns. She deposited the tray on the low table next to the sofa and gave them both a small curtsy. She was painfully thin. Her shoulder bones protruded so much the outline showed through her summer uniform.

"Hello Amy, do you remember me?" Clara spoke gently.

Amy clasped her hands in front of her and nodded. "Yes, Miss Clara, I'm glad you avoided marriage, to him."

"So am I. Did Sir Norris offer you a new position?"

"No, Mrs. Goins got me back in my old job." Amy smiled and her pretty face lit up. Her dark eyes flashed. "Sir Norris doesn't notice what servants are where. He doesn't bother us at all."

"Sit down Amy, I see Mrs. Goins has provided us with three plates and cups, let's talk over morning tea." Clara poured tea for each of them

and buttered three buns. The routine actions helped to calm her nerves and by the time she finished she felt up to the task. She may have failed Amy when they first met, but she would not do so again.

Amy sat at the very edge of one of the stiffest chairs. She took a cup of tea and one of the buns and balanced both in her lap.

Clara glanced at Roland and he gave her a small nod and took a bite of bun. She trusted him to interrupt with questions and clarifications if he needed to, but otherwise he was prepared to let her lead Amy in the interview.

“Please don’t be nervous, Amy.” Clara gave the young woman a sincere smile. “Are you aware that Sir Norris accused me of murdering Henry?”

“I don’t believe he does anymore, Miss. That detective--your dad I reckon, Mr. Roland.” Amy’s gaze switched from Amy to Roland and back to her lap as she spoke. “He’s been round here a few times talking with Sir Norris in his office.”

“I see.” That was news to Clara, but perhaps he met with Sir Norris to ensure he had all the facts about his son and just how many enemies he made. She worked to keep any hint of surprise from her tone. “We, that is Roland and I, have also dug into Henry’s background and we are hoping you can help us sort through a number of allegations we have heard.”

“I’ll be happy to help if I can, Miss.”

“Firstly though, can you tell me if Henry’s valet has returned?”

“Mrs. Goins told us he vamoosed to elope with his fancy lady, Moira Kelly. She works at the Red Dog Tavern, I daresay he does as well now.”

If true that ruled the valet out as a suspect. Her list was getting shorter and shorter. “We have heard that Henry enjoyed relationships with a number of married ladies?”

Amy huffed. “Mrs. Henshaw and Mrs. Thomas? They were the latest.”

“He told you about them?”

Amy blushed scarlet and stared at the floor. “He liked to brag.”

Well, that confirmed the names of his paramours. Both couples attended her ball, but could they have known about the knife in Grandma Beth’s room? Or where to find the medicine and how to use it?

“Did he also brag about his business dealings?” Roland asked gently.

Clara slumped back against the seat, glad to have a few moments to corral the thoughts gamboling through her head.

“Often.” Amy drained her tea and set the crockery on the floor at her feet. “He never expected or wanted conversation from me, and I soon learned not to ask questions.”

“Did he ever mention Messrs. Robson and Wigram?”

“The merchants from Boston?”

At Roland’s nod Amy continued. “He laughed all the time about those two. Especially the one who owed all the money, but I don’t remember which one of them that was. He liked to play games with people.”

“In what way?” Clara sat forward again.

Amy pursed her lips. “Well, he’d do something deliberate to make a person angry, then he’d tease them till they was ready to explode. Or he’d make someone jealous then make them feel small for being sensitive.” She shrugged again. “That sort of thing.”

“Henry was a cruel man and a hard master.”

“That he was.” Amy wiped at her eyes with a scrap of handkerchief in a trembling hand.

“Are you all right now, Amy?” Clara asked as softly as she could.

“Mrs. Goins is a good sort. Even old sour-face isn’t so bad.” Amy grinned with only the second smile to decorate her pretty face since their conversation started. “I’m so glad you avoided him Miss. He told me once he couldn’t wait to marry you so he could show you what happened to a stuck-up brat who didn’t know her place.”

Clara froze in position, the throb of her heartbeat unnaturally loud. She remembered his fingers digging into her arm, his hand against her throat, the way he slammed her against the wall. When she glanced back at Amy she saw understanding and sympathy in the softness of her expression and shine in her eyes.

“I wish I’d thumped that man when I had the chance.” Roland gripped her hand, not caring to hide the tremor in his voice.

Clara squeezed his hand hard. “I wish you had too, Roland.”

“That makes three of us,” Amy said with a bite in her voice.

Clara laughed at the absurdity of it all and the tension in the room broke. They hadn't learned much more, though everything Amy told them confirmed what they had already deduced about Henry's character.

"Thank you for speaking with us, Amy." Clara stood. "I am more relieved than you could know to find you well. You have been extremely helpful."

"Happy to oblige, Miss." Amy stood and curtsied.

Clara found one of her calling cards in her bag and gave it to Amy. "I would be happy to take you on as an assistant to Edna, if you ever think of changing jobs."

Amy took the card in trembling hands. "Do you really mean that, Miss?"

"Of course—"

"I didn't mean to imply you would say things you wouldn't deliver on." Amy blushed again.

"I know, and yes I really mean it."

Amy gathered the tea things onto the tray and left them with repeated apologies and thanks.

Clara took in several deep breaths and calmed herself. "He meant to harm me."

Roland pulled her into his chest. "Let's not talk any further here, little one. Are you ready to go home?"

She nodded and let him guide her from the room. As soon as Roland opened the door, the scent of freshly baked bread and pastries filled her senses. Edna was talking and gesturing with Amy, and as soon as she caught sight of Clara and Roland, she gave the girl a hug and gathered their belongings into her arms.

"You'll be off then, Miss?" Mrs. Goins, her face as red as her hair, looked up from the stovetop.

"Thank you so much. For looking after Amy and for allowing us to speak with her." Clara stepped closer to the stove even though the heat surely brought sheen to her nose. When Roland tugged her away, she let him.

"She's a good girl." Mrs. Goins made a shooing motion with her hands. "Now, out of my kitchen and take that one with you." She

pointed her elbow toward Edna but there was no malice in her words.

“You make a fine cup of tea and very good sticky buns, Agatha. Thank you.” Edna grinned at Mrs. Goins, presumably Mrs. Agatha Goins.

“You’ll remember those recipes?”

“I’ll send them over this afternoon.” Edna touched her forehead in a small salute and joined Roland and Clara at the door.

They paced to Roland’s carriage in silence. His driver, still wiping crumbs from his mouth, ran in front of them to climb into his seat.

When they were all seated, Edna broke the silence. “You are as pale as snow, Miss, what ever happened?”

Roland relayed their conversation with Amy while Clara clutched at his arm.

“I don’t like to speak ill of the dead, but that man had it coming.” Edna wrapped a rug around Clara’s knees. “It was a kindness offering that sweet girl a position, Miss Clara. She will need a lot of training, but she has the makings of a fine assistant.”

Clara gripped Edna’s hand for a few seconds but couldn’t speak for fear of letting out the tears that threatened to fall.

Arriving at the Penrose Estate they all glanced at the open gate, one another, and the carriages in their circular driveway.

“Mr. Penrose is home, Miss.” Edna blew out a long sigh. “He will not be pleased.”

Why on earth was he not in New York? Clara’s stomach clenched as a wave of nausea caused her body to droop. Had he come home because her arrest was imminent?

“That’s my father’s carriage, he must be here as well, but I do not recognize the other two.” Roland hugged his arm around Clara’s shoulders. Most improper, but Clara drew comfort from his touch.

“We can tell him that Roland took me for a ride to cheer me.” Clara leaned into his embrace and clutched at the rug even though it was more than warm enough not to need it.

She swallowed a hard lump in her thick throat. Her father was not stupid. He would not believe Roland just took her for a ride. She would get a lecture at best, possibly a lock fitted to her door. And poor Roland, he’d stayed at her side through this, and now he would be in trouble also.

“No point in delaying.” Roland pulled away from Clara to jump out first and help the two women out.

Clara missed his closeness, but didn’t dare anger her father further by entering with Roland even closer than a husband should be in polite company. “No point in delaying the inevitable lecture. Edna, you scoot away. You were just following my orders, I will not let father’s wrath fall on you.”

Clara straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin and walked to the front door.

Evans met them at the door. “Your father and his guests are in the sitting room.” He cast a glare at Roland. “He wishes you to join him immediately.”

He took their hats and gloves, and walked stately before them.

“Clara! There you are.” Her father vibrated with anger.

Roland brushed his fingers against hers for a few seconds. The touch sent a tingle to her spine, and she swept into the room with all the confidence she could muster as the four men--her father, Roland’s father, Chief O’Connell and Sir Norris, rose.

She sat in her usual chair, Roland dropped into the seat next to her, and the other men all sat.

“You promised me you would stay at home today.” Her father’s glower was known to send his staff scurrying. Clara was made from tougher fabric, but it would not help her cause to mention that she hadn’t actually made any specific promises, so she held her tongue.

“You have been rather busy, Miss Penrose”, Chief O’Connell said, “a proper Kate Warne.”

Clara bristled at the sarcasm in his voice as he mentioned the most famous female Pinkerton detective. It seemed all of the men in the room knew about her investigation and none approved, not even a little bit.

Her father leaned forward, his hands gripped hard around his knees. “Let me make myself clear, Clara. I forbid you from leaving this house until the proper investigation is closed and the culprit behind bars. Chief O’Connell has widened the search for Henry’s murderer, and I would hate to see you put in a compromising position. Do we understand one another?”

Clara held his gaze as the words rolled in her head. Expressly forbidden sounded serious, and he said the words in front of

influential men. He knew she would not deliberately act in a way to cause him embarrassment. Widened the search must be a polite way for the chief to say he was starting to consider other possibilities for a culprit, apart from herself. She probably had Roland's father to thank for that.

"I understand, Father." Clara nodded her head and lowered her gaze to the floor. She would not argue with him in front of present company.

"Perhaps you will be good enough to explain yourself." Mr. Fisher directed the question to Roland.

The tone in his voice belied the politeness of his words. If anything he was just as angry as her father. Clara thought about speaking out and claiming that Roland had taken her for a carriage ride. But she quickly dampened the idea. They hadn't asked the servants to keep quiet about their visit and Sir Norris would soon find out the truth.

Roland glanced at Clara; she itched to take his hand but clutched them in her lap instead. She gave him a small nod and hoped he would realize she gave him approval to speak the truth. Lying would only get them both even more into their fathers' bad books.

Roland sighed. "I'm sorry, Father. We spoke with Amy this morning, at Sir Norris's residence. It was entirely my idea—"

Clara's father interrupted with a huff. "We both know my daughter has a mind of her own."

"I know what you've been doing, Roland. When I spoke with staff at the Norris residence yesterday, I found they had already been questioned. By *you*." Mr. Fisher narrowed his eyes at his son. "Why on earth did you go back? What in the devil's name possessed you to take Clara with you?"

"That part is my fault, Mr. Fisher." Clara couldn't let Roland take all the blame. "As soon as I heard that Mrs. Goins had re-employed Amy, I begged Roland to take me to see her. I feel so guilty. I knew something was wrong when Amy took Edna's place while Edna rested her ankle. I noticed the bruises on her arms and I chose to believe her when she told me of her clumsiness. She was shy and withdrawn. Henry's bullying and abuse couldn't have helped her. I had to see how she was for myself, not just physically but mentally and emotionally as well."

Clara stopped to draw breath.

“What in the blazes do you mean? Henry was neither a bully nor abusive, and certainly would not have bothered himself with a maid.” Sir Norris glowered at her.

“I’m afraid that is not the case, sir.” Mr. Fisher held out his palm to quieten any response Sir Norris may have thought about making. “I have information to share with you. Miss Penrose, I’d prefer for you to leave us.”

“I agree.” Clara’s father gave her one of his ‘don’t mess with me’ stares.

She almost yelled that she already knew Amy’s sad story, that Roland didn’t treat her like a half-wit female who couldn’t handle the truth. Who on earth did they think got heavy with child and grief stricken with their loss?

Perhaps noticing her ire growing, Roland stood and reached for her hand.

“I have not finished with you, Roland.” His father pointed at the seat and Roland sat back down.

“Perhaps you could come and see me later?” Clara tried to whisper.

Mr. Fisher must have possessed bat-like hearing. “Roland will not visit the Penrose home, more specifically you, Miss Penrose, until the investigation is over.”

Chief O’Connell stood at the mantel and lit a pipe, his sharp eyes focused on her face. “You are in enough trouble with the evidence we have, the murder weapon, your arguments with both the murder victim and Miss Stotesbury. Your meddling in the investigation is not helping.”

“If your interference has allowed my son’s killer to escape I will make sure you are punished by the full extent of the law.” Sir Norris added his scowl to those Clara already saw. The only person in the room not glowering at her was Roland.

She cast a slight smile at Roland before returning her father’s gaze. “I will be in my room, Father.” She had not done anything but look into Henry’s death, and she only did that to prove her innocence in the face of Sir Norris’s wild accusation. How would she do that now?

She left with little poise and almost fell into Edna’s arms in the hall.

“Evans sent for me.” Edna steadied her. “I’ve organized tea and toast to be delivered to your room. Here, lean on my arm.”

"I'm not an invalid." Clara hated fuss, but right at that moment she welcomed Edna's support.

"No, but four angry and professionally trained men versus one young lady sound like unfair odds to me."

"I do feel like I've been put through a clothes wringer."

Clara let Edna help her up the stairs and into her rooms. A young servant was already in the room setting out tea and a serving plate of buttered fresh bread, spread with cook's homemade raspberry jam.

"How much trouble are you in?" Edna poured tea and heaped a generous serve of the bread onto a plate for Clara.

"Roland is in serious trouble with his father. Mr. Fisher told him that he's not to visit with me until after the investigation is closed. Father has ordered me to remain at home, and both Chief O'Connell and Sir Norris seem to think me guilty of malicious meddling at best, and willful murder at worst."

"I'm not sure you can deny the meddling, Miss." Edna winked at her.

"Is it almost bedtime? I'm exhausted." Clara flopped onto her bed with an exaggerated yawn.

"It's barely lunchtime."

Clara groaned.

"Tell you what." Edna plumped the pillows. "If you eat more of that bread, we will call it lunch and you can take a post-lunch nap."

"I'm too old for a daytime nap."

"No one is too old for a nap." Edna pulled off her boots and helped her into a day gown suitable for lounging at home.

"With me stuck at home, at least we won't have to worry about running out of suitable half-mourning clothing." Clara didn't think she could eat much more, but she downed another two slices of bread and a second cup of tea before laying back and closing her eyes.

WHEN CLARA WOKE the sun had moved right around the sky. Edna sat in her bedside chair, a book on her lap.

The maid looked up. "Your father asked me to let him know as soon as you woke."

Clara nodded; he had probably paced a streak of carpet bare while letting her sleep. "Let me splash my face with cool water."

"I'll organize a tea tray and let him know."

She padded into the bathroom attached to her bedroom, slumped into the wicker seat and wriggled her toes in the soft rug. The room, with its white tile wainscot, the mermaid frieze, and the bath, sink and toilet all set in shiny white neoclassical cabinets, always calmed her. Her father had converted the small bedroom next to hers to this private oasis for her when he had the latest indoor plumbing installed. She was lucky to enjoy such luxury.

Would Henry have done the same if she had married and moved in with him? Would he even have allowed her to have her own rooms? Not that it mattered any more. She could not be forced into an engagement with a dead man.

She couldn't get away with any more procrastination, so she made herself presentable for her father and returned to her bedroom. She was still arranging her skirts and settling on her small sofa, when her father's usual rap-tap-tap came at her door.

"Come in, Father."

He strode into her room and squeezed himself into the only sitting chair in the room. She probably should have offered him the larger sofa, but she was still angry with him. For several long seconds they glared at one another.

Her father backed down first. "I'm sorry about Henry. The things I've just heard. If I had known his character sooner." He coughed, as if the apology was difficult for him to make.

"As awful as his murder was, at least I don't have to marry him." Clara would never have gone through with it, but her father didn't need to know about her plans to elope with Roland.

He let out a sigh as he gazed at the floor. "Regardless of the man's character, the timing of his death could have been better."

Clara's lips twitched at his lament. "The location also left a lot to be desired."

"That too." He lifted his head and fixed her with one of his piercing stares. "Nevertheless, I cannot permit you to further embarrass yourself by gallivanting around town, with Roland in tow, meeting with strangers in taverns one day and servants in another man's kitchen the next."

Embarrass herself or him? She had paid no attention to society gossip the last few days, but even if she were a topic of discussion, it wouldn't last for long. She couldn't stop herself from answering him back though. "It was the ladies' room in a restaurant, not a tavern, and Mrs Goins treated me with kindness and respect. You make my inquiries sound sordid, Father, and I assure you they were no such thing."

"I am not accusing you of improper behavior." He ran his hand through his thinning hair. "I understand your desire to prove your innocence, and heavens knows I am well aware of your impatience. You must give Mr. Fisher time, he has barely enjoyed three days in which to uncover a viper's nest of secrets."

He sighed again and Clara took note of the rings under his eyes, the heaviness in his jaw, the slump in his shoulders. He looked like he hadn't slept since Henry's murder. Perhaps he hadn't.

"I'm sorry for distressing you, Father. I will stay at home as you have requested, but please let Minnie and Roland visit with me." She needed her best friends close, she needed Roland close. Already an empty hole filled her chest at the thought she might not see him for several days, maybe weeks, while his father worked to prove her innocence.

"That's not my decision, Mr. Fisher has decided he does not want Roland to see you until the investigation is completed to his satisfaction." He shook his head. "I agree with him that you are a bad influence on one another. He may permit Minnie to visit, I will ask him the next time I see him."

"Thank you. Father, I have grown fond of Roland." She twisted her hands as she waited for him to respond. What would she do if he hated the thought of Roland courting her?

"I see how you look at one another, smile and laugh at one another's witticisms, not to mention sneaking a touch to an arm or a knee when you think no one is watching."

Chest tight, Clara held her breath. Her father's observations and perception surprised her.

"Roland is not a suitor I would have picked for you."

"But Father—"

"Let me finish Clara." He crossed his legs as he inhaled a deep breath. "I know his father is wealthy, but his chosen profession is somewhat

beneath us. Roland is still young, and still studying for his law degree. I doubt he could afford to keep you in an appropriate degree of comfort for many years yet. Have you discussed a possible future together?"

Did a brief discussion of eloping together count? She felt certain that Roland was developing a fondness for her, but she hadn't asked him. Was it appropriate for her to do so? Did she care about what other people considered appropriate? Her father waited patiently for her to answer him. "Roland has not asked for my hand. I don't believe he would consider offering for me until he was settled in his career, nor do I agree he is beneath us."

"I understand your growing fondness, but if he is serious he needs to discuss his intentions and prospects with me." He held up both palms as if to emphasize he needed her to slow down. "It is too soon after Henry's death to even consider making an announcement regarding a new engagement."

"I know." Clara pulled a pillow against her chest and hugged it tight. "On both matters, I know." Tears welled; she blinked furiously to get rid of them. She wasn't a damsel who cried and swooned.

"Can I trust you to stay at home?" He asked gently. "Can I trust you to forget about Henry's death and the investigation Mr. Fisher is running?"

It was worse than a lecture. She couldn't tell him she was untrustworthy, so she nodded. "I may not forget, Father, but I will not meddle in Mr. Fisher's investigation in any way."

"I will direct Evans not to admit visitors, including the Fisher siblings, at least for a short while." He stood and squeezed her shoulder. "You have received a number of visitors during your absences. Perhaps tomorrow you will find the time to respond to the calling cards left for you."

"I will." She clasped her hand over his on her shoulder. "The ladies from the Fund for Orphans will be here tomorrow afternoon, it is our last meeting before the fete."

"I know that particular charity is close to your heart, and I see no issue with your philanthropic work. I'm sure you will find it a useful diversion. Are you joining me for dinner?"

Could she face another meal, punctuated with stilted conversation about nothing of importance to her? She glanced at her father's creased and concerned face. She couldn't add to his worries so she

nodded. At least he hadn't asked her to promise she would not think about Roland.

That wasn't a promise she was prepared to give.

“

Silly me, thinking things couldn't get any worse. It seems I'm guilty of meddling in an official investigation in which I am considered the prime suspect. Worst of all, Roland and I have been forbidden to continue our investigation. I am confined to my room and Mr Fisher declared that Roland is not permitted to see me until the investigation is done. At least Father didn't explode when I told him of my growing fondness for Roland. But tarnation I want to see him, touch him and just be close to him—Father expects me to get through this, without him by my side. But I don't think I can.

Clara's Journal, Tuesday afternoon, July 24, 1884

C

lara spent the evening after dinner distracting herself with the latest copy of *Harpers Bazaar*. She could hardly wait to read the next installment in the serialized novel *A Transplanted Rose*. It told the story of a Midwestern girl named Rose Chadwick who travelled to New York with her pushy aunt. She transformed into a cultured woman within New York society but, along the way, she wrestled with moral dilemmas that would have sent many a young woman running for the hills.

Clara scooted closer to the light with a sigh. Moral dilemmas like marrying above or beneath one's station. Not that Roland was in any way beneath her station. He was a gentleman in every sense of the word, and descended from one of the first Philadelphians. On his mother's side though, apparently that didn't count as strongly as lineage from the first male Philadelphians.

Sinking into the fictional account was exactly what Clara needed. She crossed her fingers that the British Lord Rose fancied would soon propose so she could read about Rose's wedding trousseau which would be designed by Charles Frederick Worth.

She retired to bed early despite napping most of the afternoon away. Maybe mentioning her growing feelings for Roland to her father was a mistake. Not that she could correct it now. The words had already been spoken.

“Penny for your thoughts, Miss.” Edna brushed her hair with long, smooth strokes and it gleamed like black silk. In contrast the skin at her neck seemed an even paler than usual creamy white.

Clara shrugged and the brush clipped her ear. “Ouch. I really am away with the fairies tonight Edna.”

“Are you worried about Mr. Norris’s death?”

“Not really, Sir Norris seems to have given up on accusing me of the murder. I’m sure Roland’s father will solve the case with flair. He usually does.” Clara nibbled her bottom lip. Edna not only kept her secrets but also, had looked after her with tenderness ever since her mother passed on. “Do you like Roland?” She blurted out the question without quite meeting Edna’s gaze in the mirror.

“The more important question is, do you like him, Miss?” Edna braided her hair ready for bed.

Clara’s shoulders tightened until she thought she might snap in two, right down her middle. “Your opinion is important to me.”

Edna helped her into bed, plumped her pillows and brought her books and journal from the desk where she had left them last night. She sat on the edge of Clara’s bed and squeezed her fingertips. A liberty that some mistresses may have snapped at, but not Clara, never with Edna.

“Dear girl, the way you two only have eyes for one another brings joy to my heart. I like him very much. But we may have our work cut out for us to ensure your father sees all of his good qualities.”

Clara lurched forward and hugged her maid. “I don’t think I can bear to be parted from him.”

“I’m sure he feels the same way. Warm milk to help you sleep?”

Clara nodded. Edna’s cinnamon and nutmeg concoction always helped her to settle, and she needed all the help she could get.

Did Roland feel the same way? He seemed to, but her father could be formidable when he wanted to be, and when it came to her, he turned into a dragon slayer. Would Roland want to go through the hurdles her father would no doubt lay down just to get to her? Would he even want a wife who could put on the social graces when she had to, but also possessed an independent spirit?

Instead of reading, Clara tried to clear her head and think logically. Roland had been permitted to stay while the men discussed Henry’s character and the progress of his father’s investigation. Did they tell

him to stay away from any further investigation? Did they remind him to stay away from her? Would he agree if it were for anything but her well-being?

She pounded her pillows and let out a low and very unladylike growl. It was not in her nature to sit in her rooms and sew or read all day. Tiny wings fluttered in her chest. Not in her nature, so, she wouldn't. She just had to work out how to keep her promise to her father without constraining her curiosity and the determination to prove herself innocent.

More importantly perhaps, how to work with Edna to reveal Roland's many good qualities to her father.

WHEN CLARA WOKE on Wednesday morning, the brilliant red and orange light of dawn streamed into her room. She hadn't expected to sleep, yet she couldn't recall tossing and turning or even dreaming. Birds twittered outside, the dawn of a new day. Still in her nightgown, she paced to the window to gaze at her view overlooking the gardens. The old wisteria climbing the pergola beneath the window had lost almost all of its flowers already and soft lilac petals covered her windowsill. Staring at the gnarled trunk, an idea formed in Clara's mind. Would it take her weight? Would it take Roland's?

It had been sometime since she and Roland climbed trees together. She covered her mouth to hold in a chuckle. Her father would scold her to high heaven and back if he knew the ideas that raced around in her brain.

Edna tapped at her door and entered on tiptoes.

"I'm awake Edna." Clara sang from the window.

"What has got you in such high spirits today? I expected to find you still asleep in your bed."

"I will tell you later, after breakfasting with Father." She grinned at Edna and paced to her closet. "My lovely blue tea dress for today, I think, the loose unboned bodice is perfect and Father has always liked the color on me." The cornflower blue brought out a clear sky hue in her own dark gray eyes.

Edna raised her eyebrows but helped her dress without questions.

Clara read and journaled until eight, checked her appearance again and descended the stairs thinking ladylike thoughts to keep her steps

slow and measured. Her efforts were rewarded when Father spotted her at the bottom of the stairs. She kissed his cheek and took his arm to walk to the breakfast room.

“How are you this morning, my dear? You look well-rested.”

She opened her mouth to say something similar back, but if anything he appeared even more fatigued. “I am, thank you.” They both sat in their usual places and Father opened the newspaper. “Will you go to town today?”

“Yes, I am needed in the office.” He glanced over his reading glasses. “I hope you are not planning any mischief.”

Not if one excluded an attempt to climb the wisteria. She gave him a docile smile. “Of course not, Father, I am thinking of walking in the gardens for a while as it is such a beautiful day.”

“Take Edna with you, and do not go into the Fisher Estate.” He raised and lowered his eyebrows as if he thought to say something then changed his mind. “I am glad you have agreed to forgo playing at detectives with Roland.”

“I won’t forget the trust you have placed in me.” She ground her teeth but would keep her promise and not leave the estate, or interfere in the investigation again. She crossed her fingers under the table and prayed that he would not think to ask her not to contact or communicate with Roland in any way.

When he said nothing else, Clara let out a breath, helped herself to freshly baked muffins and jam and poured tea for both herself and her father. They talked about his business and her charities until he glanced at his watch and declared it time to make a move.

He kissed the top of her head. “Mr. Fisher will get to the bottom of this, my dear. He will prove your innocence beyond doubt and life will return to normal.”

Clara smiled at him. “Enjoy your day in the office Father. I look forward to hearing all about it over dinner.”

She almost cringed at the overly sweet tone in her voice. Luckily he didn’t notice anything wrong, and she gulped the rest of her tea. She rang the bell for Edna as soon as she arrived in her room.

“What do you need today, Miss?” Edna arrived so quickly she couldn’t have been far away.

“What would you say if I told you I am thinking of climbing the

wisteria outside my window?"

"I might feel your forehead, Miss. Why on earth do you want to climb out of the window? It only leads to the garden."

"Not out, but rather in. I'm sure I will need to speak with Roland, but I cannot go to the Fisher home. He cannot come here, not through conventional means, anyway." Clara looked away, not wanting Edna to notice the heat building on her cheeks.

Investigating with him had brought them closer, but was she in love with him? Would her feelings last once life did get back to its normal routine? There was only one way to find out. She needed to see him again, not just to talk about the progress of his father's investigation but also to try and talk about the future--their future--together.

"It sounds like you want him to climb up to your window, rather like Romeo." Edna gave her eyebrows a flamboyant wriggle.

Clara jammed her hands on her hips. "Father has made sure he can't get in any other way."

"I still don't understand why you want to climb it."

"I want to make sure it's climbable before sending for him."

Edna shook her head. "If you must, then climb the dratted thing, but whatever you do, do not fall and do not get caught."

"I shall not be caught, you will be my lookout."

"Sometimes I wonder if your father knows what he pays me to do." Edna laughed. "All right. I shall be your look out."

"Thank you, Edna." Clara grinned at her. "You are a most wonderful ladies maid."

"You have told me many times, Miss."

Clara led Edna down the back stairs and into the garden via the laundry. She had never done anything like this, but was already planning her moves up the wisteria's trunk with childlike glee.

They did not encounter their butler or any of the staff while they walked to the pergola under her window. He would not agree with her plan to defy her father nor her desire to see Roland, but she had to at least try and contact him.

"Gosh it is high up isn't it?" Clara stared up at her window. "I guess Roland will be brave enough to climb it if I send for him."

“It’s sturdy enough, and there’s plenty of hand and foot holds with the way it winds around the columns.” Edna patted the wood she could reach. “But be careful, if you fall and break a limb I will never hear the end of it.”

“I am not going to try and climb it all the way, just enough to make sure it is steady and will hold a person’s weight.” Clara shooed Edna away. “Scoot over there and keep watch, and whistle if you see or hear anyone.”

The trunk was rough to touch though it felt really firm and strong. She should have grabbed an old pair of gloves. Never mind, if she got a splinter or two she could claim she gardened for a short while. Clara took in a deep breath then started to climb. It was easy to find places to put her feet and hands, but hard work and her arms shook when she reached the top of the pergola. A loud whistle sounded and Clara hurried back the way she came, jumping when she was almost at the ground.

Edna hurried over. “You made the climb look easy, Miss.”

Clara held up her palms. “They are a little red and scuffed, but look, not a single splinter for my effort. I’m sure Roland will make it all the way to my window.”

“If you write him a letter, I daresay I could get it to one of the Fisher servants.” Edna smiled. “He has always been a favorite of the cook.”

“Let’s walk around the gardens.” Clara took Edna’s arm. “Can you think of a reason to visit the Fisher house that will not arouse suspicion?”

“Leave that to me.”

Pleasant tingles flared across Clara’s skin and she grinned her way through the gardens. She could trust Edna and the thought of seeing Roland brightened her spirits immeasurably.

“How are the staff coping with all this?” Clara motioned her hand as if to try and take in the entirety of the bizarre status of life in the Penrose home since her rather daring debut ball.

“A few mutterings, but Evans is keeping everyone focused.” Edna spoke with an uncharacteristic firmness. “We all know this is a decent household to work in. The publicity will die down soon enough.”

Clara’s heart swelled with gratitude for Edna’s loyalty. “It’s disturbing that so much of the evidence points to our home and to one of us.”

“Neither your grandma’s tincture nor the dagger were secrets. The whole household knew, as did many visitors.”

“Perhaps I will visit the kitchen before afternoon tea with the ladies today. I need to show my face and show that I trust everyone here.” Clara lowered her voice to a whisper. “My money is on the valet even though the Norris household believe he disappeared immediately after the murder to be with his lady-love.”

Edna let out a laugh. “I will let Cook know, I’m sure she will bake an extra cake.”

“Angel Food Cake with strawberries and cream?” Clara asked hopefully. The cake reminded her of her mother and good times with the Fisher family in the summer holidays.

Edna chuckled again. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Let’s go back inside. I have a small mountain of calling cards to respond to and a note for you to take to Roland. Let’s test the procedure with a note rather than a summons first. We need to ensure we can get it to Roland without raising suspicion.” Clara spun and headed to the house with Edna trailing behind her. She jolted to a stop at the rose garden, motioned for Edna to catch up and lowered her voice again. “Edna, am I too impulsive? What if he thinks me too forward and is quite put off?”

Edna sighed. “Silly girl, if he disliked your boldness he would have hightailed it away from you a long time ago.”

Edna was surely right. Clara marched back to her room and to her writing desk. On her third attempt at a note for Roland, Clara scrunched the writing paper into a ball and tossed it into the embers smoldering in the grate in her room. “Fiddlesticks.”

Maybe she should stop trying to write the perfect note, and just find words to express the feelings in her heart. With eyes closed, she took several deep breaths then started writing.

“

Dearest Roland,

It’s hard to believe that the days following Henry’s murder, and his father’s accusation of me, have been amongst the happiest of my life. Yet I must admit that is the case. From your promise to elope, so as to save me from a fate worse than death; through the days of your company, support and respect; to

today when I feel your absence deeply even though it has not yet passed twenty-four hours since our fathers collaborated to keep us apart. Please forgive my boldness, but it was remiss of me not to let you know that my esteem and fondness for you has gone beyond most trusted friend. I hope to see you again soon, but in the meantime, I send my loving thoughts.

Was it too much? Too much dithering. She signed the note *forever yours truly*, Clara, folded the thick paper and slipped it into one of the rose scented envelopes her mother always used. It seemed fitting given her tryst with Roland in the rose garden just a few days ago.

Clara called Edna from the dressing area where she was repairing a small rip in one of her favorite hats.

Edna pocketed the envelope and glanced at the mantle clock. "It will soon be time for lunch. I'll deliver the message for you and get you something to eat when I get back."

"Good luck." Clara hid her shaking hands under the desk. "I'll respond to these calling cards and take my lunch in the conservatory."

Edna gave her a grin and a small salute before treading softly from the room. Clara gathered up the calling cards, journal, and her lap desk and headed to the small conservatory at the back of the house. She had to keep busy or she would go mad. What if he ignored the note and did not respond? What if he responded with words that showed he had not developed feelings for her? Her stomach felt as empty as if she had failed to eat for an entire week, yet she doubted she could eat a thing.

She positioned herself on the wicker rocking chair next to the fish pond with a view across a small and tidy orchard and picked up the first calling card. When footsteps sounded some time later, she didn't dare turn around in case the police or Mr. Fisher had returned to arrest her.

When Edna slid a covered tray onto the table next to her chair, Clara let out a long sigh.

Edna flicked the tea towel from the tray with a flourish and a grin.

An envelope, Clara's name scrawled across the front, leaned against the bowl of salad. She recognized the writing immediately, typical lawyer squiggle. Roland would fit right in to his chosen profession. Edna made Clara a cold meat and potato salad sandwich while Clara lifted the envelope from the tray and gripped it in trembling hands.

This was it. His answer to her heartfelt message. She wanted to open the envelope and not open it in equal measure.

She slapped the firm paper into her palm. No way to find out if she didn't read it, besides she'd never acted out of cowardice and would not start now.

“

A quick note between calling cards. I will soon have a sprained thumb—it looks like every gossip in Philadelphia has tried to see me. A good nights sleep did me a power of good. I promised not to leave home, but I can't forgo Roland, not when I fear a noose around my neck for a crime I did not commit. I admitted my feelings to myself, shared them with my father, and I've bared my soul to Roland in writing! Now I just have to wait for his response.

Clara's Journal, Wednesday afternoon, July 25, 1884

Clara ripped open the envelope from Roland. She unfolded the note with shaking fingers and read silently until a trembling sob tore from her throat.

Edna rushed to her side and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Whatever is wrong, Miss Clara? Do I need to box that boy's ears?”

Clara shook her head but couldn't trust her voice for several seconds. When she did finally speak her voice quivered. “He said he returns my feelings. Once this business is over, he will ask Father if he can court me properly and appropriately.”

“That's what you want, isn't it?” Edna asked softly.

“More than anything else in the world. I think I've loved him forever, but I've only realized it in the last few days.” If Father said no, they could still elope. But she wouldn't let him say no. “Thank you for waiting for Roland to write a response.”

“It was no trouble, I promise. Now, eat.”

Suddenly starving, Clara bit into the sandwich. Her father would not readily agree to Roland courting her, but she would succeed. Now that she knew that Roland returned her growing fondness, nothing would stop her from spending the rest of her life with him. For the first time in her life she knew what people meant when they said they were walking on a cloud. Roland's response left her so happy she felt like

she was floating on a soft carpet woven from hope and energy.

After lunch, Clara happily responded to every calling card in her tray until it was time for her meeting with the other ladies organizing the Fund for Orphans charity fete.

Grace sent her apologies, but Clara enjoyed seeing the rest of the charity ladies that afternoon. No one mentioned Henry's passing and she'd delighted to occupy her mind with something other than the murder and her own future for a few hours.

Dinner with her father passed smoothly. He seemed thrilled to hear her talk of the upcoming fete in eager tones, but of course he didn't know the real reason for the joy she felt. She excused herself early to spend some time with Grandma Beth.

The bedroom door stood ajar, Clara knocked once and tentatively pushed it open.

"Edna said you'd be in to sit with the old girl." Mary, her grandmother's maid, grinned at her.

"Who are you calling old?" Clara's grandmother chided Mary, but it was with a smile and a twinkle in her eye. She sat up from the pillows artfully arranged at her back. "Come here and give me a hug, child."

She looked well, her pale blue eyes bright, cheeks pink and her thick white hair braided and hanging over her shoulder. Clara strode to the bed and let her grandmother's warm embrace and lavender scent envelop her.

"Nothing else for now, thank you Mary." Her grandmother spoke over her head, and a few seconds later the bedroom door clicked shut.

"For goodness sake, sit and tell me everything. I know something ails the household but Mary seems to think divulging any facts will harm my precarious sanity."

"Grandma, there is nothing wrong with your sanity." Clara managed to control the quiver in her voice. "Did you know that Henry Norris is dead?"

"That is all I do know. I never liked the man, very selfish to get himself murdered in our house on your debut night."

Clara laughed and arranged herself comfortably on the bed next to her grandmother. It felt like eons since she had poured her heart out to the elderly woman who loved her fiercely, and was equally loved back. "If I tell you everything we might need a while."

“The night is young and I’m not going anywhere. I will send for Mary if we need sustenance, now start at the beginning.”

Clara gripped Grandma Beth’s hands and did exactly that. She started with the morning arguments with her father and Henry, the horrid confrontation with Henry about her choice of gown, the incident with Grace and the absinthe and the awful moment Sir Norris accused her of killing his son. At that point she found herself sobbing in Grandma Beth’s arms. Beth paled considerably but rallied enough to hear about the enquiries Clara made with Roland and the dreadful things they learned about Henry.

They held one another tight for a long time. Clara pulled away first. “I should let you sleep.”

Beth lifted Clara’s chin. “The migraine does not bother me tonight love, but I am sure something else bothers you.”

Clara shut her eyes. She had never hidden her true feelings from Grandma Beth; it didn’t make any sense to start now. “Do you remember Roland Fisher?”

She nodded and smiled. “Lovely young man from next door. I remember the scrapes you two managed to get into, remember them all like it was yesterday.”

“I think I might love him.” Clara stared at her hands in her lap, not sure if she needed Grandma Beth’s approval or not, but fearful of how gutted she would feel if ridicule came instead. A silence stretched out; when Grandma Beth’s wrinkled hand gripped her own she jumped.

“You think you might? Or you know you do?”

“I.” Clara swallowed. If she thought of life without Roland, emptiness welled up and threatened to drown her. If she thought of marrying another man the idea sickened her, and when she closed her eyes and saw Roland’s face, she saw his acceptance, respect and support. If she was honest with herself, she saw her feelings for him reflected in his eyes when he gazed upon her. “I wrote him today and told him I was fond of him, and he answered immediately to say he shared my feelings and would ask Father if he could court me as soon as this business with Henry is over.”

Grandma Beth lifted her eyebrows; no doubt to remind her she hadn’t answered the question.

Clara pressed her palm to her chest. “I love Roland with all my heart and will wither and die if I cannot have him.”

Grandma Beth laughed. “A little melodramatic perhaps, but heartfelt all the same. What does your father say?”

Clara huffed and held up a finger to start marking off all the points her father raised. “Firstly, he said that while Mr. Fisher is wealthy, he is a private investigator and his chosen profession is beneath us. Secondly, Roland is still studying a law degree and can’t afford to keep me in an appropriate manner, yet. His third point is that it is too soon after Henry’s death to even consider making an announcement regarding a new engagement. And finally, he said that if Roland is serious then he must discuss his intentions and prospects with him.”

“It doesn’t sound like an outright no.”

“How could he say Roland is beneath us? The Fisher family is also one of the oldest in Philadelphia.”

“I will talk with him.” Beth patted her hand and stifled a yawn. “Mr. Fisher’s sugar plantations in the Caribbean do not occupy all of his time. Many a landed gentleman in Europe dabbles in private investigations. It is a better hobby than gambling or lazing.”

“Grandma Beth, please don’t trouble yourself. You need to rest.”

She set her jaw, her lips pressed tightly together. “I may not have much longer child. I will do what I can while I am still able.”

A wave of weakness washed across Clara’s muscles. Grandma Beth was old and in ill health, and of course she knew the woman she loved wouldn’t live forever, but the thought of losing her brought an awful heaviness to her heart.

“Goodnight darling.” Her grandmother slumped back into the pillows, her voice surprisingly strong even when her body let her down.

Clara kissed her cheek. “Goodnight dearest, I know I can’t keep you forever, but I still need you.”

Grandma Beth’s eyelids fluttered, but when she heard soft snoring, Clara tiptoed from the room and quietly shut the door behind her. She smacked herself in the forehead. For pity’s sake, she had selfishly exhausted Grandma Beth with her ramblings and complaints.

THURSDAY MORNING, the days were flying by now. Clara woke a little late, but she hurriedly dressed and darted downstairs to try and catch her father at the tail end of breakfast.

She opened the door and stood still for a few seconds. Her grandmother had not joined them at the table in weeks, preferring instead to take her meals in her room, yet here she was, perfectly attired in an old though still fashionable navy dress, and her silver hair braided at the back of her head.

“Grandma, it’s so lovely to see you at breakfast.” Clara hid her surprise and kissed her grandmother’s cheek before helping herself to pancakes, butter and syrup.

“A necessary evil, I’m afraid.” She patted Clara’s fingers. “I need Thomas to take me to town to see my lawyer.”

Clara blanched. She actually felt the blood drain from her cheeks. It was too soon after hearing Grandma Beth say she did not have much longer.

“Nothing to worry about darling, just boring paperwork that I have ignored for too long.”

Clara’s heart rate settled. Was it really just paperwork, or an excuse to get her father into a carriage so she could quiz him privately on his thoughts about Roland? She had promised to talk with him soon and she always kept her promises.

Her father gave Grandma Beth a fond glance. “I said I’d send for the lawyer, but your grandmother will not hear of it.”

“Indeed, I will not. I am quite well today and I will enjoy a change of scenery.”

He turned to Clara. “Will you be all right while we are gone?”

“Of course Father, I have a little bookwork to do. Finalizing details for the fete will keep me busy.”

“Would you have time to do a favor for me?” Grandma Beth patted her hand again.

Clara nodded as she poured tea for both of them.

“The shelves above my chest of drawers are crowded with an assortment of books, gifts I’ve never used and useless knick knacks. The housemaids are too afraid of Mary to tidy properly, and Mary’s old arms cannot reach the shelves anymore.”

Clara laughed at the thought of Mary, who was knee-high to a grasshopper, ever reaching the shelves. “I will be happy to, but I will not know what to throw away and what to keep.”

“Trust your own judgment child. My pearl necklace has been missing for months; it could be hiding amongst the detritus. If so, it is meant to be yours anyway, so please take it and wear it.”

Clara’s mouth dropped open. “The pearl and diamond necklace that was a wedding gift from Grandpa?”

“Close your mouth darling. Yes, that is the one.”

“We should set off if we are to get to the appointment in time.” Thomas stood and helped Grandma Beth to her feet.

She looked frail, even thinner than Clara remembered from the last time she’d seen her grandma dressed for an outing. Her voice was strong though. “It’s Mary’s day off so she won’t hover around you wringing her hands.”

“Poor Mary, you know how well she looks after you.” Clara stood and kissed both of them on the cheek.

They must really have needed to hurry. In his haste her father left the newspaper on the table. She grinned to herself, grabbed the newspaper and settled down to read it with another cup of tea. Thankfully the Penrose name was not mentioned anywhere. Neither was Henry’s murder, which was odd. Or perhaps not as the owner of the *Philadelphia Times* was friendly with both Sir Norris and Mr. Fisher.

She returned to her room and rang for Edna, who arrived within minutes as usual. “Grandma Beth asked me to tidy and sort out the shelves above her chest of drawers. Would you like to help?”

Edna laughed. “How much choice do I have?”

Clara pressed a finger to her lips and cocked her head.

“In that case I’d love to help. I’ll get us both aprons, it’s bound to be dusty up there.”

“I better wear something old, perhaps something dust colored.”

“No such thing in your closet, Miss, but I think the pale gray tea gown would be perfect. It has an easy to clean collar and plenty of freedom of movement.”

“Good thinking. Apparently I might find a family heirloom.” The pearl and diamond necklace was an even flashier piece of jewelry than the diamond necklace of her mother’s she’d worn at her debut ball. Father must have been worried as well as in a hurry. He had not commented on the necklace and why it wasn’t in the safe.

“Thank goodness, it’s time for a fun-filled activity.”

Clara snapped out of her reverie. “I’m not sure I associate dust with fun.”

“The break from being stuck in your own head will be good for you.”

Edna could be right. A break from the thoughts that swirled in her brain sounded like heaven.

With her torso only loosely wrapped in a corset, hair in a braid down her back, and an encompassing apron over her gray dress, Clara felt freer than she had in days. At Grandma Beth's room Edna pushed the door open and let them in to the suite the older woman had spent most of her time in for the last decade.

Edna marched to the window, pulled the drapes open and the bedroom filled with light. "Where do we start?"

Clara glanced around the rather stuffy room crowded with pieces of large antique furniture. "Let's open a window to let in some air."

"Unfortunately your grandmother comes from an era that saw fresh air as the enemy." A cool breeze lifted a few short hairs from Clara's forehead as Edna opened both windows.

The four-poster bed was neatly made and every surface dusted and relatively neat, except for the three shelves above the chest of drawers. A mark showed where the dagger case used to sit. A weight returned to Clara's shoulders and chased away the carefree spirit she'd briefly enjoyed. Someone snuck into this room and took that knife.

Was it to kill Henry, or a thief taking advantage of an old sleeping woman to steal a valuable dagger? If it was a thief, why did he stop at the dagger? Did he proceed to each open room to steal an item, only to find Henry inside the guest room and kill him in a tussle? No, that didn't explain the poison. Her grandma was a light sleeper; why hadn't she woken?

Nothing explained how the bloodied blade ended up stuck behind the barrel of water hemlock in their kitchen garden. Unless the killer planted the weapon in a place the police would be both bound to see and link immediately to their household.

"I guess the police took it away." Edna riffled through the basket of cleaning supplies she brought and handed a dust cloth to Clara. "Why don't you start on the knick knacks? I'll lay a sheet on the bed, you

can dust each one and lay it on the sheet so we can examine the clean pieces in better light and decide what is worth keeping.”

Clara blinked a couple of times to clear her head, took the cloth from Edna and moved to the shelves. Dust covered an eclectic mix of items, glassware from Prince Albert's Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, decorated china and buttons from both the Paris Exhibition in 1855 and another exhibition in 1873 in Vienna. Grandma Beth often told her stories of her travels with Grandpa. The trinkets may not be worth much in dollars, but they were priceless memories. She carefully wiped each one and laid them on the sheet.

Some of the pieces looked valuable, such as small statues that could have been centuries old and a pair of lidded vases painted in the Chinese style.

“Shall I put all these purses in the armoire?” Edna’s question interrupted the dive into her memories.

“Let’s open the jewelry boxes first. How Grandma Beth’s necklace arrived on one of these shelves is a mystery, but she thought it might be here.”

“The heirloom we are looking for is a necklace?” Edna stopped sorting through the purses and joined Clara at the chest of drawers. “That large square box looks promising.”

“It does, doesn’t it.” Clara nodded and pulled down four jewelry cases, carefully wrapped together in a soft silk scarf. Two contained rings and another a lovely sapphire pendant. She saved the large square box until last and took it to the bed to open it. The necklace was there.

“It’s magnificent.” With a gasp, Edna clutched her hand to her throat.

“It’s a work of art. My mother wore it at her wedding.” Clara gulped. She would not have worn it to marry Henry. But for Roland, she would. She stroked the stones and pearls with a trembling finger. “Too bad modern wedding dresses are high-necked.”

“Ball gowns can be either high or low.”

They could, and this gorgeous necklace, with three strands of diamonds connecting diamond encrusted bows, and a huge natural pearl hanging from each bow, needed a fabulous dress. “I’ll ask Father to put it in the safe.”

“The purses, then I think we are done except for finding a home for all the items.” Edna stifled a yawn.

Clara followed with a yawn of her own. "I can take some to the charity fete, and I'll ask Father to get a few others valued. I think the key is in the desk." She darted to the small Georgian mahogany ladies bureau in the corner.

Trouble was it had so many drawers she didn't know where to look. In the first drawer she opened she found a few well-handled letters from Grandpa to Grandma Beth. Their enduring love for one another gave Clara all sorts of hope for the future.

Several small drawers were filled with loose buttons. Clara grinned. Grandma Beth liked to save buttons to sew back onto coats and dresses, but she never did the sewing. In the drawer holding various inks and pens, she found a small, stoppered, glass vial, still half full of a clear viscous liquid. She popped the stopper of the vial and gagged.

Edna rushed over. "What is it?"

Clara held the offensive vial to her. "The cloyingly sweet carrotty smell is distinctive."

"Dear Lord." Edna took a sniff, crossed herself and restoppered the bottle. "It's hemlock juice. How on earth did that get to be up here in the old girl's room? The entire supply is supposed to be safely locked away in the butler's pantry."

"It's likely the same poison that someone used on Henry." Clara shoved it in her apron pocket meaning to dispose of it as soon and as safely as she could.

"You must tell your father." Edna gripped her wrist. "This might be important."

"Perhaps it is Grandma Beth's insurance, in case she needed a way out of her illness." Clara whispered.

It was hard to imagine her pious grandma taking such action and earning herself a place in purgatory, but it was a logical theory. With this much poison she would have died quickly, and on her own terms.

Or it could be the poison used to kill Henry, in which case, why was it in Grandma Beth's room? Father didn't need to know about it, did he? Then again, if the police found her with it, she would be hung for murder. With a soft sigh she returned the glass bottle to the drawer and slammed it shut. At least she had found it with Edna looking on.

Not that a witness would matter. The police would claim she could have used it, then hidden it at anytime. Needing Roland by her side, and forgetting Edna for a moment, she rubbed at her forehead. She

needed to see Roland, to talk with him, to let his belief in her strengthen and calm her. She didn't care one whit that their fathers forbade them from seeing one another or helping in the investigation.

"You've got dust all over you." Edna pulled a large cotton handkerchief from her uniform pocket and wiped Clara's face. "I know this latest development is concerning. Let's finish up here, and I'll get your lunch."

Clara nodded and helped Edna sort everything into separate piles for Mary to put away, for the fete, and for Clara to give to her father for valuation.

BACK IN CLARA'S sitting room an embarrassing gurgle came from her stomach. Even though breakfast seemed a long time ago, the emptiness wasn't just due to hunger. She missed Roland with an acute ache. "I need you to deliver another note to Roland, please."

"Of course, but it will have to be after lunch. Cook is indisposed and I promised to help."

Clara nodded. She could hardly take the note herself. She might as well visit with Roland in full view of anyone looking and suffer the consequences. At her desk she wrote a short note begging Roland to come and see her as soon as he could as she had discovered possible evidence. She drew a sketch to show which was her window, and which wisteria and pergola she had tested, and grinned as she thought of him laughing at the information.

Her smile faded as she sealed the envelope. Darn it, why had she found the poison?

She jolted to her feet and started pacing the length of her suite, from her sitting room, through her bedroom and into her dressing room. Facts and fears raced through her brain like a herd of mustangs galloping free. It was bad enough that the police found the bloodied dagger. They discovered the hemlock juice locked in the butler's pantry and found that incriminating. Clara wrapped her arms around her tightening chest. How much more suspicion would attach to the household, and especially to Grandma Beth's room, once they found out about the poisonous hemlock juice hidden in her drawer?

Anyone that entered the room saw the fancy poniard displayed in its glass case. The case was almost two feet long after all, and the short stabbing dagger itself not much shorter. That by itself wasn't strong

evidence. The hemlock juice was locked away in the butlers' pantry and Evans himself made up the tincture to an exact specification to ensure her grandmother wasn't accidentally poisoned.

Explaining away the hemlock juice was harder because less people knew about it and Evans religiously guarded the key. How on earth could she explain the poison hidden in Grandma Beth's room? Still pacing, she clutched her cheeks in her hands and groaned.

It was possible that someone rummaged in the bureau and found it. But why would anyone look in the bureau of an old lady's room? A thief? Perhaps they could explain all of this away with her theory of a thief who took advantage of an old sleeping woman to steal a valuable dagger, who then went to each open room to steal an item, only to find Henry inside the guest room and get into a tussle in which Henry died. No. No. She groaned again. Didn't explain the poison in Henry's body.

No one would suspect Grandma Beth. Would they?

Of course not, the frail old lady was sweetness itself. Clara marched to her window and yanked the windows wide open. She needed Roland.

She gulped in huge breaths but couldn't fill her lungs. She swayed so much she had to grip the windowsill to stay upright. No. Grandma Beth had no reason to kill Henry. As if she could. She was a frail and sick old lady. Not to mention righteous and good.

Where are you, Roland? She stuck her head out of the window and gazed across the garden to where she could just see the border between the Penrose and Fisher homes. Perhaps he would wait until nightfall. The tightness in her chest became painful. That was hours away. She would pace a hole into the floor while she waited and her agitation grew.

She was still gripping the windowsill when Edna returned with a lunch of cold meats, salad and a fruit tart with cream on the side.

"I can't eat." At Edna's nudging, Clara sat on the sofa and let Edna set the tray on a small table next to her. "Is Father home yet?"

"No, but I will let you know as soon as he arrives." Edna prepared a plate of food for Clara and set it in her lap. "Eat miss, you have had a shock I know, but you will need your energy for later."

"I don't know what to do. I don't want to tell Father about what we found." Clara rubbed at her forehead. She struggled to even say the word poison. "I don't want to speak with him until I've spoken with

Roland. What is wrong with me, Edna? I've turned into a big fat dithering sissy." Clara pushed the meat around the plate and picked at her salad.

"You and Roland have always been as thick as two thieves. It's only natural that Henry's murder has pushed you together."

"What do you mean?" Clara sighed. The serialized books she read often had the hero and heroine coming together as if drawn by a fate stronger than all the obstacles trying to keep them apart. "I'm not sure I believe in destiny." Clara eyed the fruit tart and large dollop of fresh cream. "Does Cook have coffee downstairs?"

"I'm not sure about destiny either, but I know that going through adversity with a person you already like intensifies any romantic feelings. Yes, Cook has coffee on the stove, but you know your father doesn't like you drinking it."

"But you can sneak me a cup?" Clara let out a deep sigh. "He is all I think about, Edna. I can't imagine ever feeling romantic toward anyone else. I find myself day-dreaming about all the precious moments we have shared, not just in the past few days but ever since we met. I even day-dream about our possible future together."

"I will sneak you a cup of coffee if you eat more cold meat and salad."

Clara shoveled meat and salad onto her fork. "You drive a hard bargain."

"You are in love, my sweet girl." Edna squeezed her shoulder. "I will deliver the note as soon as I've supervised the after lunch kitchen clean. I'm sure he will run over here just as soon as he can."

Clara nodded. She didn't doubt that he would want to reach her quickly. Especially not if his emotions raged anything like hers. Was this love? She bounced between euphoria and energy, and fatigue and anxiety. Her heart raced and she couldn't control her rapid shallow breathing every time she thought of him. Yet every moment with him, she just wanted to gaze upon his face, listen to his deep and familiar voice, run her fingers through his hair and her hands over his chest.

"I will take dinner here this evening. Let Father know I have a headache. We can't have him visit while Roland climbs through the window."

"Might be funny in a vaudeville show." Edna chuckled. "But not so comedic in your sitting-room."

"Father would be horrified. Actually, I can imagine him appalled if I

attended a vaudeville show. I think he'd be shocked to find out I knew they existed."

Edna swept from Clara's room with another chuckle. Clara spent the rest of her afternoon alternately trying to read, and attempting to write in her journal. For the first time in for ever words did not come easily. She drank more coffee and tried on four dresses until she settled on a lilac and turquoise gown whose colors she adored. Edna put up with her fussing until dinnertime approached when she announced that she had to help in the kitchen again as Cook was still unwell.

Clara paced again as dusk approached. Was he not coming to her aid? She shouldn't have drunk the second coffee, or was the manic energy forcing her legs to keep moving another symptom associated with falling in love?

"Clara! Psst!"

Roland's voice interrupted her thoughts, and her heart responded like it always did. She lifted her skirts and ran to the window.

"I'm not sure I can get across the ledge running across your window." Roland stood on the pergola, his elbows at ledge height, but the distance was too great for him to pull himself up and clamber across.

"What can I do to help? I know." Clara's eyes gleamed with barely restrained excitement. "If I sit and extend my arm I will steady you as you climb."

She didn't wait for an answer. She turned around, sat on the windowsill and leaned back with her arm outstretched as far as it could go across the ledge. Roland grabbed her hand, his tug almost pulling her out, and she gripped the window frame with her other hand to hold on. He scrambled his feet against the bricks and then the weight on her arm relaxed.

"Have I hurt you?" Roland's breath whispered across her ear as he massaged her shoulder.

She sat up, pulled him into her room, and almost pulled him to her chest. "One arm may now be longer than the other. Otherwise I am completely unharmed."

She wiped stray petals from his hair and Roland pressed a soft kiss to her cheek.

"I got away as quickly as I could. Your note sounded urgent. Whatever has happened?" He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Clara almost blubbered at the concern in his voice and his gaze. But she could not come undone. Not yet.

“

Poison hidden in Grandma's drawer. Not just her tincture, but hemlock juice capable of killing a bull, let alone a man. Or woman. Dear Lord, what do I do? I have never been so desperate to talk with Roland. To feel his strong arms around me again.

The truth is, I know what I must do. If only I could write this gnawing dread away. But I am as lost for words as I am drowning in acid and despair.

Clara's Journal, Thursday afternoon, July 26, 1884

C

lara swayed in Roland's arms. Vaguely aware of the dampness on her cheek from his kiss, and the pressure of his hands around her shoulders, she focused her gaze onto his face.

"Clara?" Roland smoothed his hands down her arms. "You were miles away. I take it something unpleasant has worried you. Let's sit and you can tell me why you sent for me."

He guided her to the sitting room area with his hand on the small of her back.

Clara lowered her voice to the merest whisper. "I found poison in Grandma Beth's room."

"Poison?" Roland's eyes narrowed as he pulled away. "Hemlock?"

She missed his closeness, and almost threw herself back against his chest. But first, they needed to talk. Clara sat primly on the chair her father had occupied and gestured to the sofa. Roland sat and stiffened at a rap on the door. They both relaxed when Edna entered with a tea towel covered tray.

The delicious smell of cooked meat and seasoned gravy followed Edna into the room.

"Mr. Fisher." Edna gave Roland a small nod and deposited the tray on the small table between them. "Excellent timing. I didn't dare bring

two trays, but there is an extra plate and cutlery, and the plate is piled high with dinner.”

“Thank you Edna, is Father home?”

“He sent word that he is dining at his club tonight. Your grandmother came home alone and has retired to her room.”

The tightness across Clara’s shoulders eased a little and she grinned at Roland. “Father has been unintentionally helpful.”

Edna pointed at the door. “Cook is on her feet, but in a mood.”

“Go ahead and assist in the kitchen, I will summarize our day for Roland while we eat.” Heaviness lifted from Clara’s heart and a slight smile lifted her lips. Now that Roland was here everything would be all right.

As Edna left, Roland shook his head. “Forget the summary, I want all the details.”

Clara took a little of the filet beef, mashed potato, and sweet green beans fresh from their garden, onto the clean plate and gave the full plate to Roland. He frowned but before he could speak she pointed at the bread and cheese. “I will fill up on cheese, you know it’s my weakness.”

He grinned at that. “Start at the beginning and leave nothing out.”

Clara laughed. “I feel like a kid eating forbidden fruit cross-legged in the nursery.”

“I remember those days well, the three of us, Minnie included of course, gorging ourselves on fruit plucked fresh from our fruit trees.” Roland tapped her knee. “Stop procrastinating, the longer you delay the more I worry.”

Clara wasn’t procrastinating, not really, just enjoying this moment with Roland and trying to pretend that her father hadn’t tried to arrange her marriage to a man she despised, and that same man hadn’t got himself murdered at her own ball. Unfortunately both things happened. She swallowed a mouthful of food that suddenly tasted like cold leftovers, took a gulp of wine and started with breakfast that morning when Grandma Beth asked her to tidy the shelves and look for the necklace.

By the time she finished her story, with begging Edna to deliver the note to him, Roland had finished his meal and was picking at the cheese and grapes.

He squeezed her hand. "What do you want to do?"

"I honestly don't know." Clara moved to the couch, propriety be darned, and took his hands in hers. "I guess we need to know if Grandma Beth hid the vial in the bureau to use herself."

He kissed the top of her head. "The murderer may also have hidden it, thinking no one would find it there."

"I thought of that possibility. But would Chief O'Connell believe it?" Clara pulled away. "He'd likely think that I hid it there after using the poison on Henry, perhaps even my own guests. A drop in the punch wouldn't be enough to kill but would probably cause the symptoms."

"Have you considered the possibility that your grandmother used the poison?" Roland let his words trail into silence.

"On anyone other than herself? Of course not." Clara moved so her legs no longer angled toward Roland. The strength of her denial belied the fact that she had considered the very possibility only a few hours ago. "She is far too ill, not to mention the gentlest of souls."

"Her maid has been with her forever hasn't she?" Roland spoke gently.

"Why does it matter?"

"Because in my experience, a long-serving ladies maid knows everything there is to know about her mistress, and her rooms."

Clara went to deny it, but thought of Edna and how close they had become. She couldn't think of a single secret she had kept from her. Instead she changed the subject. "I have not told Father yet. Perhaps we should tell both our fathers together."

"Unless you want to explain my unchaperoned presence in your room, when we have been told to avoid one another and keep our noses out of the investigation, you may want to consider telling your father alone."

Clara's cheeks heated. She and Roland were alone together in her room, alone and sitting next to one another on her small sofa. Whether they discussed the investigation or not, her father would have the largest litter of kittens ever seen.

Roland wrapped his arm around her shoulders and hugged her close. "It's worth talking to the maid first. If she confirms that your grandmother kept the solution for her own use in case the pain became too much to bear, then telling your father is probably all you need to do."

“And if Mary knows nothing about it?” Clara slumped against his chest and he enveloped her in a tight hug.

“Then we have to let my father know also. It might be evidence and he needs all the facts to present a solid case of your innocence.”

“And hopefully the Penrose household’s innocence as well.”

He kissed her cheek, and Clara roamed her ungloved hand across his shirt covered chest. For a few moments she wanted to experience a real kiss of the sort she read about in the romantic novels her father hated her to read. She wanted a communion in which their lips, with an eloquence transcending words, their breath, fluids and substance intermingled so they fused into one united being within two frames. She blamed her English teacher’s love of Shelley’s intense romantic poem, *Epipsychidion*.

But Roland must have taken her breathlessness for fear because he pulled away a little so he could gaze into her eyes. “Everything will work out, my sweet girl. I am right by your side and intend to stay here.”

“Roland, what will we do if Father denies our courtship?”

“Your father will not deny us.” He grinned at her. “We make each other happy, and above all else that is what your father wants for you. He was mistaken in thinking you wanted a title and lands in Europe. We will show him what you really want and he will not deny you your happiness.”

Roland’s certainty lifted a heaviness she hadn’t realized penetrated her heart. “I will speak with Mary in the morning.”

“If you like I can wait while you speak with her, and we can discuss her answers. Will that make you more comfortable?”

“Thank you Roland.” She gloved her palm to his cheek. “I’ve an even better idea. I will bring her here, you can hide and then you will hear everything.”

“Hide where?” He lifted his brow.

She glanced around the sitting room and across into her bedroom. “Behind the screen. It’s not tall enough for you to stand, but you can sit on the trunk hidden behind it.”

They tested it and discovered that Roland could hear her conversation easily. Clara went to ring for Edna then remembered the kitchen difficulties. “Fiddlesticks, I will have to go myself. Be right back.”

She sucked in a deep breath as she walked toward Grandma Beth's room. She didn't want to alert her grandmother, not yet at least. Relief blossomed when she saw Mary shutting the door softly.

"She is asleep, Miss, exhausted after her outing to town." Mary bobbed a courtesy at her.

"Perfect, I was hoping to speak with you."

"With me, Miss?" Mary shuffled back a step.

"It will only take a moment and I will very much appreciate your time." Clara gestured to her door.

Mary's eyes widened, but ever the loyal servant, she paced steadily to Clara's room and kept her head high as she walked inside.

Roland was nowhere to be seen when Clara closed the door behind her. Mary looked terrified and Clara suddenly realized that she probably thought she was in trouble of some kind.

With her pulse racing Clara walked to the sofa and perched at the edge of the seat. "Please sit with me, Mary, and I will get to the point." She swallowed in her too-dry throat as Mary took the chair. "I realize this is uncomfortable. But I must know the truth. When I tidied the shelves for Grandma Beth I had to look for a key to open the armoire, while searching for the key I found a small bottle of hemlock juice in her writing bureau."

Mary's cheeks reddened and she glanced away from Clara.

"I'm sure you are aware that Roland and I have tried to help clear the suspicion that hangs over all of us in Penrose House. I'd rather not disturb her." Clara took a deep breath. She didn't enjoy distressing Mary but she had to know. "Can you explain why Grandma Beth has hemlock juice in her room?"

"It's not my place to say." Mary wriggled and twisted her hands in her lap.

"I do not want to see any one of us hang for murder. Please. Help me."

Mary let out a deep sigh. Clara let her sit in silence for several minutes. "I'd like you to know the truth, and I think she wants it, too."

"Can I get you a glass of water?"

Mary shook her head and stiffened her shoulders. "Your grandma found out how Mr. Norris treated women, many times over. Men like that don't change. She knew that if you married him, he would treat

you the same way. She tried talking to Mr. Penrose but of course he wouldn't listen to the ramblings of his old mother-in-law. So she collected a few drops of the hemlock juice anytime she accessed the butler's pantry."

Clara's eyes widened and she chewed on her bottom lip. Grandma Beth had tried to help her, and she'd had no idea. Grandma had not only tried talking with her Father but, even considered poisoning Henry to save her from a brutal marriage to him. The image of the older woman walking through the house to the kitchen and sneaking into the butlers' pantry with such intent sent her thoughts spiraling. She had to push them away to focus on what Mary was telling her.

She couldn't keep the surprise from her voice. "But that room is locked, it's always locked."

"And the key is right there on the wall, if you know to look for it."

That was true. Ever since they started storing foodstuffs as well as the silver in the room, most staff knew where it hung. Returning to Henry's murder, it was therefore possible that an observant stranger may have found the poison. Mary coughed and the sound pulled her attention away from her rambling thoughts.

"She only intended to make Henry Norris sick enough that your father would not announce the engagement as he intended." Mary's voice quivered. "To give her more time to make him see sense."

"What happened?" Clara steeled herself. She needed to know everything.

"I wasn't with her, Miss." Mary wiped at her eye, but would not return Clara's gaze. "But she was in high spirits when she told me about instilling a drop into the port he kept in his room. Then the migraine took her bad and she barely said a word until just about the time you visited with her."

"She didn't stab Henry?"

"No." Mary took in a shuddery breath. "How could you?" Trembling fingers covered her open mouth. "As if that sweet old—"

"I'm sorry Mary, I had to ask. Someone killed Henry in our home and I cannot rest until we find the culprit." Clara reached out and grabbed Mary's fingertips. "When did you notice that Grandpa's dagger was missing?"

"Not until it was pointed out by that nosy policeman." Mary huffed.

Clara believed her. Mary was too short to reach and clean the case properly and it was a task Grandma Beth always liked to do herself. She closed her eyes and massaged her temples.

“What will happen, Miss? You won’t let anything happen to her, will you?” Tears fell from Mary’s eyes and she let them run down her cheeks.

Clara passed her a handkerchief. “I don’t know, but I will do everything in my power to make sure she is safe. Thank you Mary. You may go.”

Mary scurried from Clara’s sitting room. Clara didn’t move; she couldn’t.

Roland sank onto the sofa next to her and snaked his arm around her shoulders. “None of that conversation was easy to hear.”

She leaned back into his chest and for the second time since Henry’s death let tears fall freely. Roland caressed her back with long languid strokes, his words gentle, soothing, comforting.

“We can’t tell anyone.” Clara mumbled into his chest.

“Look at me.” Roland lifted her chin. “We have to tell my father. I will do anything to clear your name Clara. You are too precious to me not to.”

“No.” Clara smacked her palms into his chest. “Not if it risks Grandma.”

And the risk to her was huge. The police would take this opportunity to tidy up loose ends and charge Grandma Beth with murder. They had both the poison and the dagger in her room, Mary’s revelations and probably Grandma Beth’s confession in the morning, plus a strong motive. Clara had never known her to lie, not about anything. But they wouldn’t accept that, they would think that she confessed to the poison so she probably also stabbed him to finish the job.

Roland lifted her hands and kissed each palm.

“I mean it, Roland—“

“Shhhh. The next step is to speak with your grandmother—“

“We already know what she did.” Clara struggled to get the words out.

They knew what Grandma Beth did, and it was all to protect Clara from marriage to a brute she despised. It was her fault. Her fault that precious Grandma could hang for murdering a dishonorable cad who

wasn't one iota of her worth.

“With the poison yes, but she may know more about the dagger.” Roland massaged Clara's upper arms, seemingly unaware of the tsunami threatening to engulf her. “Whoever wielded the blade is the one who killed him.”

Clara turned from him and clutched her arms around her hardening stomach. “Dear Lord, forgive me. It's all my fault.”

“*I*t’s all my fault.” Clara whispered again, even quieter this time.

Roland squeezed her shoulders. “You are distraught—“

“Don’t tell me how I feel.” Clara snapped and immediately regretted it. She crumpled forward. “I’m sorry.”

Roland wrapped her in his strong arms. Without words he told her that he loved everything she stood for, her hopes and fears. He pulled her body closer, as if simply holding her wasn’t enough, and he needed to feel her pressed against him. Within that cocoon she was safe, protected. Within his arms she could almost pretend the conversation with Mary had never happened. That Henry never happened.

But the conversation played on a loop in her head, and unfortunately Henry did enter her life. Roland was right, they had to speak with her grandma and they couldn’t go to their fathers with half the story.

“How can you think any of this is your fault?” Roland chided her gently as he traced a light touch up and down her spine.

She didn’t lift her head. “She would not have acted if I hadn’t complained so bitterly.”

“She made her own decisions, and we do need to speak with her. She may be able to tell us when the dagger disappeared from its case.”

Yes, she made her own decisions, but Grandma Beth loved fiercely. “Not tonight, we both heard Mary say that she is exhausted from today.”

“Not tonight, but first thing in the morning.” Roland dropped a quick kiss to her forehead. “You didn’t ask Mary to refrain from telling your grandmother that you interviewed her.”

“I would never test Mary like that. Her loyalty is to Grandma, as it

should be.”

Roland pulled away and stood. Clara stayed slumped on the sofa as he rang the bell for Edna.

Edna lifted her brow when she entered and saw Roland.

He gave her a small nod. “Clara has suffered a bad shock and needs to sleep. I will be back as soon as I can in the morning.”

He kissed Clara’s cheek before climbing out the window. She lifted her face for him, but couldn’t find the energy to speak.

Edna prepared Clara’s night things and helped her undress in silence. Vague moonlight shone in the clear night sky and Clara begged for Edna to leave the curtains open so she wouldn’t be left in the dark. As Clara lay against the plumped pillows pretending to sleep, Edna dragged the folding cot into the sitting room and settled herself onto it. Sweet Edna, not fussing, but staying here on the uncomfortable cot to make sure she wasn’t alone.

“Thank you, Edna.” Clara whispered into the stillness.

If she concentrated, she remembered the sensation of Roland’s embrace. She wanted him to wrap his arms around her every chance they got. Whether for a quick hug to show her that he understood, or for the shielding cocoon he had wrapped her in this evening, she loved both. How could she make her father understand that she didn’t need money or status? All she needed was Roland’s love to make anything and everything possible.

But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t help thinking about Henry’s body in a puddle of his own blood, the stained dagger, or Grandma Beth’s lack of regret about poisoning him.

She couldn’t have stabbed him. The woman she knew so well would not do anything so wicked.

But, given all of the evidence pointing to the Penrose home and its inhabitants or regular and very close visitors, if Grandma Beth didn’t stab Henry, then who did and why?

“

It's late. I should be asleep—especially given the discussion I must have with Grandma tomorrow. I'm trying to think of everything I want to ask her, but really it just comes down to one vital question. Does she know who stabbed Henry Norris, was it she? I'm wavering in a desperate desire for anyone else to be guilty, and the agony of worrying about how far she was prepared to go for my sake. I don't know if I can bear seeing her sent to prison, but I also know I have to be as strong as she is and has taught me to be. It is the only way I can honor her and all she means to me.

Clara's Journal, Friday, July 26, 1884

A rowdy cacophony of boisterous birdsong woke Clara the next morning. Friday. Almost a whole week since her ball and Henry's murder. In a haze between sleep and full awareness, she picked out the various birdsong. As soon as she heard their individual sounds, the discord became a symphony of beauty and awe. Despite the uncomfortable revelations of yesterday she couldn't keep a slight smile from her face.

She stretched and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Edna had already tidied the cot away and draped her favorite hand embroidered, teal silk dressing gown across the end of her bed. She slipped into the gown, ambled into her bathroom and splashed cold water on her face to wake herself up.

Edna returned and set up tea and toast in her sitting room.

"Would you find out if Grandma is awake, and let Mary know that Roland and I will talk with her this morning?" Clara nibbled at the toast, but the upcoming chat left her dropping stomach in knots. Even liberally covered in raspberry jam, her breakfast tasted as dry and inedible as sawdust.

Edna nodded and left her alone again. Clara didn't need a nagging for not eating, so she broke one of the pieces of toast into small pieces, tossed them from her window and scoured the gardens for any sign of

Roland.

"She is already awake and expecting you. Let's get you dressed before Mr. Fisher arrives." Edna bustled into her dressing room as soon as she returned.

Clara pulled back startled until she realized Edna meant her Mr. Fisher, her Roland, and not his father. Her chest tightened as her stomach sank even further. Mary must have already told Grandma Beth about their chat last night. She fought the urge to pace even though conflict warred inside her.

What if she destroyed the bottle of poison? Neither the police nor Roland's father knew about it yet. The police might suspect herself or Grandma Beth, but with no more evidence than the circumstantial dagger and poison in Evans' pantry, was it enough to charge her?

On the other hand, and more likely, the unknown killer hid the bottle and it could be evidence that would help Mr. Fisher catch the culprit. She gripped her hands around her aching head. The truth, it was always best to stick with the truth. A lie might give instant relief, but the long-term effects could be devastating.

Edna returned with a simple, white, lightweight cambric gown. Perfect for the heat the bright blue sky promised. Dressed and coiffed, Clara sat at her writing desk, pulled out her journal and started writing, capturing all her thoughts on everything she and Roland had discovered. On a clean page she jotted down the questions she knew she had to ask Grandma Beth to get the answers she needed.

Engrossed in her own head, Clara didn't hear a sound at the window until Edna darted across the room with one of the suitcase straps. She threw one end of the strap out the window and braced herself against the wall. Roland climbed into the room and Clara took several steps toward him with her arms already lifted to embrace him, until she remembered they were not yet courting officially let alone engaged.

Clara tamped down her excitement. Roland gave her a grin and kissed her hand. When he lifted his face again she saw admiration and fondness and tried with every ounce of her being to show she felt exactly the same way about him.

"Ready?" He asked softly.

"No. But that doesn't change what we have to do." Clara gestured to the journal on her bedside table. "I tried to start a list of the questions I want to ask, but I've realized we really just need one answer."

Roland nodded. "If your grandmother did not poison and then stab Henry with her husband's dagger, then we still have a murderer to find."

Clara ignored her pounding pulse and pushed her shaking legs to her door. "Come along, let's get this over with."

"I'll check the hallway." Edna darted in front of her and grabbed the door handle.

Roland pulled Clara back, her spine to his chest, his hands gripping her shoulders in a possessive way that was somehow still gentle and full of support. Clara leaned back into him and covered his hands with her own, trying without words to let him know how much she was grateful for him, how much she cared.

But the moment was over too quickly. At a single nod from Edna to let her know the coast was clear, she led Roland from her room.

"GOOD MORNING, MY DARLING GIRL." Grandma Beth took a gulp of coffee from a Philadelphia Exposition souvenir mug and returned it to her bedside table.

Clara smiled when she saw it was the one she had bought for Grandma because she was too ill to visit the exposition with her and Father. She took Grandma Beth's outstretched hands and kissed her cheek. She breathed in the heady aromas of chocolate and coffee. "I see Mary still brings you the coffee mixture Father doesn't like either of us to drink."

Grandma Beth huffed. "He is too old fashioned for his own good. A woman's constitution is at least as strong as a man's. Besides, drinking coffee helps with the pain. What a pleasant surprise to see you, Mr. Fisher. I thought your fathers prohibited you from seeing each other?" She framed it as a question rather than a statement with a twinkle in her eye and a twitch of her lips.

"Good morning, Grandmother Merrick." Roland pulled another chair to her bedside and glanced at Clara. "When a friend is in need, I will disregard any instructions that forbid me from aiding them."

"A friend?" She quirked her brow.

Roland glanced at Clara again, a slight blush coloring his cheeks. "A good deal more than a friend."

Grandma Beth held out her hand and Roland pressed a light touch of his lips to her knuckles.

“You were a good boy, and you’ve grown into an upright young man. I know you will take good care of my Clara.”

He nodded and the blush spread from Roland’s cheeks to his ears. He tried to cover his discomfort with a cough, but Clara and her grandma shared a knowing look.

Clara felt Grandma Beth’s forehead. “You are running a fever. You should rest.”

“Mary will look after me, but a discussion is long overdue.” She held Clara’s questioning gaze. “I didn’t know anyone suspected you of killing Henry. Not until the migraine passed and you visited me the day before yesterday.”

“Mary told us.” Clara’s voice trailed off. She couldn’t look at her grandma, couldn’t stop the quiver in her voice. “I’m sorry. You were asleep. In my impatience I spoke with Mary. I couldn’t wait.”

“Hush, child. I’m glad you found the bottle, and glad you spoke with Mary. Look after her when I’m gone, won’t you?”

“You are not going anywhere.” Clara grabbed Grandma Beth’s hands and held them in her own.

“The Pale Rider comes for us all one day.” Beth stroked Clara’s forearm. “I will tell you who I visited yesterday. But first let me tell you both what happened on the night Henry Norris died.”

At nods from both Clara and Roland she lay back against her pillows. “I did kill him.”

“No.” Clara lifted from her seat then slumped back down. “The poison didn’t kill him, someone stabbed him.”

“The someone was I.”

Clara collapsed into herself. Myriad emotions fought for dominance, but she couldn’t think straight. The heaviness in her body dragged her spiraling downwards.

Roland hugged an arm around Clara’s shoulder. “Please continue, Mrs. Merrick.”

“You already know that I poisoned Henry.” Her breathing was labored, a light sheen covered her pale face, but her voice held strong. “I went to the guest room to find out what it would take to persuade

Henry to back out of the marriage arrangement. I had the vial of poison with me in case he refused and I needed an alternative way to stop the engagement from going ahead. Henry laughed at me. He told me straight up that I had nothing I could offer him and he refused to even discuss, let alone consider, my suggestion.” She shrugged and let Clara help her drink a few sips of coffee. “When he turned his back to me, I dropped a bead of the hemlock juice into the glass of port he was drinking. He took several gulps and collapsed. In my haste to add the poison before he turned around, I must have accidentally given him too much. The fits came on almost immediately and he writhed in pain. It was horrific. He begged me to end his suffering.”

“You don’t think he could have survived the poison?” Clara clutched at Roland’s arm as she whispered.

Grandma Beth shook her head. “I’ve seen it affect cattle the same way. There is no hope for them.”

Roland hugged Clara’s shoulder tighter. “So you decided to stab him with your husband’s poniard?”

“Yes, I stabbed Henry with my late husband’s dagger.” She shrugged again. “I did not know what else to do. I came back here, then returned with the knife and stabbed him in the chest. He died soon after.”

“We should have tried harder to change Father’s mind.” Clara gripped her grandma’s hands.

“He would not listen to either of us, and heaven knows you argued and debated with him using so many different tactics my pride in you soared. Yet it was not enough. So I tried to persuade Henry to back out of the arrangement.”

“I’m glad you stabbed him out of mercy rather than in anger.” Clara gripped her hand.

“It doesn’t change the fact that the man is dead.” Grandma Beth squeezed her fingers but glanced at Roland. “I’d rather not repeat myself, Roland. I believe your father is gathering evidence to prove Clara’s innocence. Would you tell your father please?”

“Gladly, but I have one more question.” Roland cupped his chin. “Do you know how the bloodied knife got itself located behind the water hemlock barrel?”

She visibly deflated. “After the deed was done, I tried to hide it in the thick privet behind the barrel, but it fell to the ground and I couldn’t

reach it. Mary found me then and fatigue took hold of me. I thought about asking Mary to hide it better, but I couldn't implicate her any further in this sordid mess."

They were silent except for the sniffles and hitched breaths coming from Clara. Roland pressed a handkerchief into her hand and she wiped her face. "You said you would tell us about your trip to town yesterday."

Roland went to stand. "Perhaps I should give you some privacy?"

"No. It's better that you are here." Grandma Beth touched his fingertips. "I visited my doctor as well as my lawyer yesterday."

Clara gasped.

"The tumor is growing and there is nothing to be done about it. I have at best several weeks."

"Grandma no, surely Dr.—"

She pulled Clara closer and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "I'm seventy-six, sweetheart, and ready to accept relief from constant headaches. I will miss you more than words can say." She glanced at Roland as she fell back against the pillows. "But I leave you in caring hands and that gives me so much comfort."

Clara sobbed against her grandma's chest until Roland pulled her away and wrapped his arms around her.

Grandma Beth fell into a fitful sleep and Clara pulled the bell for Mary before tiptoeing from the room. As they closed the door behind them, Roland pressed his fingertip to his lips. Clara didn't need the reminder that they must return to her room quickly. After hearing the truth from Grandma, she couldn't face Father's anger if he caught them together either heading to or in her room.

She jolted to a stop as soon as they were safely inside and Roland stepped into her back. He gripped her waist to steady her, she let her head tilt back against his chest and for a few moments she reveled in his closeness. She craved closer intimacy with him. Despite a coating of fresh tears on her cheeks, a wanton, shameless desire almost had her spinning around to at last find out what it felt like to kiss him.

Roland released his hold around her waist and guided her to the small sofa. He ruffled his hands through his hair and the thick waves jostled for position across his forehead. With a pained sigh he gazed from her eyes to her mouth as he ran his tongue across his bottom lip and Clara realized that he was just as desperate to kiss her.

"I can't wait to end the charade and insist Father announce our engagement." Clara wiped the sodden handkerchief across her face and clutched it in her lap. At least engaged they would enjoy some freedom to enjoy time together without a chaperone and without sneaking around.

He pressed the bell for Edna. "The waiting is almost killing me too, and I will petition your father as soon as I can. But we have a new problem to solve. Do you think your grandmother told us the truth?"

Clara's mouth dropped open and she stared at him. "Why wouldn't she?"

"She's dying, my love, and she would do anything to protect you."

Edna chose that moment to enter, took in the scene, and replaced Clara's crumpled handkerchief with a dry one from her bedside table.

“What do you need me to do, Miss?”

Clara hiccuped into the scrap of white cotton. Edna went into the bathroom and returned with a glass of water for Clara.

“Sit down, Edna, and I will tell you what Clara’s grandmother just admitted to us.” Roland waited until Edna perched on the edge of the chair and gave a concise summary of their morning.

“Mary hinted the old girl’s illness grows worse.” Edna shook her head. “Would she have the strength to do everything she confessed to in one evening?”

“She did stay in her darkened room for days afterward. Perhaps she over-exerted herself and triggered a bad migraine?” Clara sipped at the water in between hiccups. Grandma Beth would do almost anything to protect her, but to falsely confess to killing Henry when she did not, would mean allowing a murderer to walk free. No, she wouldn’t do that.

“Hopefully Father is home. I need to share this development with him immediately,” Roland mused aloud.

“But if we tell him...” Clara gulped, unable to finish the sentence. He would feel conscience bound to tell Chief O’Connell. The police would take Grandma away, lock her in a tiny cell and put her on trial.

“Father has no more desire to drag the Penrose name through the mud than I do.” Roland kissed Clara’s forehead. “He may insist on speaking with your grandmother and Mary himself. I will have to admit to Father that I came here despite his insistence we stay apart until he solved the case.”

Clara cringed and slumped back into the seat. She knew Roland was right. Tarnation! Her father would kill her when he found out that not only had Roland visited, but also they had interfered in the investigation, again, and heard a confession from one of the family.

“Rest my love, I daresay we will return soon.” Roland kissed her cheek but Clara barely felt the touch.

Edna helped Roland from the window and fussed around Clara until she sent her away.

What would happen now? Nothing would ever be the same. Her father already disapproved of Roland as a suitor; the news she had to share with him would not help matters. A horrible sense of emptiness filled her and she closed her eyes to await a knock on her door.

A KNOCK at the door pulled Clara from her stupor, but it wasn't her father come to castigate her. It was Edna, who tutted. "Let's get your hair fixed."

Clara rolled her neck and a wayward curl dropped over her forehead. She brushed the hair from her eyes. "I see what you mean, but what is the rush?"

"Mr. Fisher will be joining us for luncheon, and your father has requested your attendance."

Clara stumbled as she stood and grabbed hold of the edge of her writing desk. It must be Mr. Fisher senior. Roland had spoken with him already. An almost overpowering fear of facing her father kept her feet glued to the floor.

She swallowed a sour taste in her mouth and forced her shaky legs to get her to the stool in front of her dressing table. "I can't do it, Edna. I can't face Father, I just can't."

"I know you can. You and the Fisher siblings have spent the last few days trying to work out who killed Henry." Edna unpinned and repinned Clara's hair with a skill come from years of practice. "You have the answer, it might not be the one you hoped for, but it's an answer nevertheless."

Why had she fought so hard to investigate? She'd used every fiber of her being to keep picking at the puzzle as if it were a game. If she had attended to needlepoint and reading for the last few days Chief O'Connell may have declared it an unsolved crime rather than try and pin it on her or anyone else in the Penrose household.

Edna walked with her down the stairs but left her standing at the door to the dining room. She took several deep breaths to steady her pulse and pushed the door open.

Her father stood as soon as she entered the dining room and waved a letter toward her. "Mr. Fisher wants to talk with us, both of us, urgently. Do you know what this is about?"

"I have an idea, Father, but let us wait for Mr. Fisher."

He rubbed at his forehead. "So help me Clara, if—"

Thankfully Clara did not have to listen to whatever accusation--quite likely something she was guilty of--he was about to fling her way, as Evans knocked on the door and announced the Messrs. Fisher.

Roland preceded his father with his shoulders squared. They both shook hands with her father.

“You may serve luncheon, Evans.” Father gestured for Clara to sit at the table so the men could also sit.

Roland pulled out Clara’s chair and made sure she was comfortable before sitting beside her, every move under the watchful gaze of her father. With everyone seated and wine glasses filled, they made uncomfortable small talk while Evans supervised the serving of a cold soup, one all of her friends in the charity organization had enthused about but Clara no longer felt any interest in tasting.

As soon as the servants finished loading the salads, fruit dishes and cold meats on the sideboard, they left the dining room and closed the doors behind them.

Her father shook his head. “I cannot believe either of you disregarded instructions not to involve yourselves in the matter of Henry’s death, and yet I cannot imagine any other reason why Mr. Fisher asked for this luncheon meeting with us all.”

Clara couldn’t help heat from rising in her cheeks. Roland grabbed her shaking hand under the table and squeezed. Her father narrowed his eyes at her as if he knew what they were doing and did not approve. Clara pushed her soup bowl away; she could not tolerate the thought of eating a thing until they got this over with. She would not lie, though if possible, she would save some trouble for Roland with a few omissions.

“Do not all speak at once.” Her father gave each of them one of his sternest glowers, ending with Roland’s father.

“There is no need for black looks, Thomas. Our children have defied us, but they have also effectively uncovered the culprit and for that I am grateful.”

Roland rose and took both his own and Clara’s plates to the buffet spread. Her father watched Roland place the filled plate in front of her with his lips pursed.

“Perhaps you should start Clara, as you found the hemlock juice.” Roland lightly touched her shoulder as he sat.

Her father’s eyebrows could not have shot any higher. Clara wasted no time in launching into the explanation. “Do you remember Grandma Beth asking me to tidy and sort through the shelves Mary cannot reach?” At his nod she took a sip of wine and continued. “To cut a

long story short, while looking for the key to the armoire to put away the many small bags we found, we discovered a vial of hemlock juice in her writing bureau.”

“Why did you not tell me immediately?” He winced, a pained expression giving away his disappointment.

“I feared that Grandma Beth hid the bottle for her to use, when, if, her illness became unbearable.” Tears pricked at her eyes and her father’s gaze softened. “I decided to speak with Mary, but instead of confirming my fears she told me something much worse.”

Clara blinked feverishly, trying to dry her eyes without pulling out her handkerchief.

Roland squeezed her hand and took up the story. “Mary told Clara that Mrs. Merrick found out how Mr. Norris treated women, and believed that if Clara married him, he would treat her the same way. When you, sir, didn’t listen to her fears she amassed drops of the hemlock juice Mr. Evans uses to make her tincture. Apparently she intended to make Henry Norris sick enough to prevent the engagement announcement.”

“That’s preposterous,” Clara’s father sputtered.

“I would have thought so too, Father, but Grandma Beth confirmed everything Mary told us.” Clara lifted her gaze and met her father’s hard stare. “Let me tell you the rest.”

Red faced, he nodded for her to continue.

So far she had left Roland out of this, but she couldn’t any longer. Father could see how involved he was. How could she tell the story so he saw Roland in a good light? What else could she omit? All of the men at the table watched her wipe her hand across her lips.

“Earlier this morning I sent Edna to the Fisher residence to beg Roland to come here to help me.”

“You were told to stay out of this and to avoid Roland until the end of the investigation, Clara.” Her father leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest.

At some point he would demand a thorough explanation, but now wasn’t the time. “I wasn’t trying to investigate, Father. I thought Grandma Beth was planning her own death and I couldn’t bear it. When I found out that she had poisoned Henry, I...” She stumbled across her words and Roland gripped her hand tighter. “I needed the man I love to support me, as he has since the ball, as he has since we

first met.”

Clara’s father raised his brow at Roland.

“I return your daughter’s feelings without reservation, sir.”

“We will discuss that matter later.”

Still gripping her hand under the table, Roland jumped back into the conversation before Clara could draw a breath to speak. “Mrs. Merrick told us that she visited with Henry on the night of the ball to find out what it would take to persuade him away from the arranged marriage. When he refused, she dropped a tiny bead of hemlock juice into the glass of port he was drinking. He took several gulps and collapsed. She realized she had accidentally given him too much and he begged her to end his terrible suffering. She returned to her room for the poniard, stabbed him in the chest and he died soon after.”

Both fathers stared at him in silence.

After several seconds that felt like minutes, Mr. Penrose laid his hand over Clara’s. “What an appalling sequence of events I set in motion.”

“Henry’s murder was not your fault, Father.”

“All I wanted was for you to enjoy everything the world could offer.” He shook his head. “I should have listened to your grandmother and to you.”

“What will happen now?” Clara’s voice quivered. This was without doubt the worst day of the worst week in her life.

Roland’s father cleared his throat. “I will need to speak with Mrs. Merrick.”

“See Evans and he will organize a suitable time. He has the details of her specialist, too.”

“Sir,” Clara whispered, “will the police take her? She saw her specialist yesterday and it seems she has but weeks to live.” Her eyes filled with tears again and this time she took the handkerchief Roland offered to dab at the moisture. “Please let her stay here so I can share her last weeks on earth.”

“I was going to suggest a sanitarium.” Roland’s father drummed his fingertips against the table. “But if I can confirm the time frame with her specialist, I expect I could persuade Chief O’Connell not to lay a charge against Mrs. Merrick.”

Clara gasped and clutched her hands in front of her chest. Grandma

not even charged with murder was a much better outcome than she expected. She muttered prayer after prayer that William Fisher would be successful.

“Sir Norris will not be happy.” Mr. Penrose let out a deep sigh. “But if you can achieve that outcome, William, I will be forever grateful.”

“Leave Sir Norris to me, Thomas. We may have to dangle a carrot in front of his nose, but unlike his son I’m sure we can buy his acquiescence.”

“You mean an introduction to the club?” Clara’s father lifted his brow then nodded. “If it’s what it takes I will support his nomination. It’s what he wanted from the marriage, after all.”

“Come along, Roland.” His father stood. “We have much to do. With Caspian away on another case you can fill the position of my assistant.”

“Of course, Father.” Roland also stood. “Thank you for lunch, sir, Clara.” He nodded his head at both and followed his father to the door.

“Come and see me tomorrow, Roland. We have much to discuss.” Thomas Penrose used a cuttingly haughty tone when he wanted to send a clear message of who held the upper hand, and he used it now. His attitude rather than his words sent a shiver down Clara’s spine. He returned his gaze to Clara’s face. “As do we, daughter dearest.”

“

The past week will remain in my heart for ever as both the worst and the best week in my life. Roland and I love one another and Father didn't react as badly as I feared, but Grandma has admitted that she killed Henry Norris. She'd meant only to cause him illness, but would the law see only the end result not her intent? Regardless, she does not have much longer on this earth, and I want, no, I *will* make sure she spends her remaining time in comfort. Father is yet to speak with me, but no doubt he will find me as soon as he returns from the city. Not looking forward to it.

Clara's Journal, Friday, July 26, 1884

C

lara was sent to her room like an errant child after luncheon, but the confrontation with her father was delayed thanks to a telephone call requesting him to attend urgent business at his city office. She breathed a small sigh of relief. Thank the heavens for the newfangled telephone contraption installed in a cupboard under the stairs.

She ate dinner with Grandma Beth in her room, but after talking with Roland and his father that afternoon Grandma tired quickly and Clara returned to her own room to pace and plot.

No doubt Father would fight her on Roland. She could try and play on his guilt over the arranged marriage with Henry, but that ploy had never worked on him in the past. She could threaten him with elopement, but that would likely enrage him. Nor would she leave while Grandma Beth lived.

Waves of dizziness and nausea assailed her and she grabbed onto the back of the sofa to keep herself upright. Her muscles felt so weak she slumped onto the seat. Losing Grandma shouldn't come as a shock; yet knowing she had but weeks left on this earth brought the looming loss to the center of her thoughts.

“Miss Clara.” Edna knelt in front of Clara and took her hands. “You didn't hear my knock or my question.”

Clara forced herself to focus. She had to swallow several times to clear the tightness in her throat. "I'm sorry—"

"Nothing to be sorry about. Roland sent a message. I can run over to the Fisher estate if you want to respond now."

"Edna, what would I do without you? Thank you." Clara ripped the envelope open with surprisingly still hands.

Clara my love,

Do not fear your father's reaction after luncheon. Whatever it takes, I will earn his trust and respect. I have sent a note requesting that he see me after breakfast tomorrow and will arrive for the appointment regardless of how he answers.

I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, sweetest dreams little one.

Never forget, my heart belongs to you, always.

Roland had signed his name surrounded by hearts. She kissed each one and reread it several times. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply to release the tightness in her chest. What would she give to have Roland's strong arms around her right now? Instead of daydreaming, she strode to her desk to pen a quick response.

"I will join Father for breakfast tomorrow, please don't let me sleep in." She enveloped her short note and gave it to Edna. Sleep felt further away than ever before, but she didn't want to risk missing breakfast. She wanted to be there when Roland arrived so her father couldn't dismiss him like a traveling salesman.

In fact, she would insist on joining the meeting between Father and Roland. Neither might approve. But it was an opportunity to show a united front. The more she thought about it, the more she liked the idea. With a kernel of hope blossoming, she let Edna prepare her for bed and drank a glass of warmed spiced milk without a fuss.

"GOOD MORNING, FATHER." Clara sat at the breakfast table and helped herself to a cup of tea.

In one of her best high-necked summer gowns and with her hair curled on top of her head, she looked every bit the lady her father expected her to be. She eyed the toast, but the fluttery empty feeling in her stomach put her off eating.

“Roland wishes to speak with me after breakfast.” Father seemed in a better mood than yesterday.

“I’m pleased to hear that, Father.” She widened her eyes and gave him a slight smile. It wouldn’t do to let on that he had written to her.

“Yesterday, you said you love him.” Father cleared his throat noisily, his gaze demanding. “Have you encouraged him?”

Clara sipped her tea with one hand gripping the soft cotton drapes of her skirt. With effort she kept her tone respectful. “Friendship grew into fondness which has blossomed into love. Our feelings for one another are mutual and developed naturally.”

“How do you know the emotion you now feel isn’t due to yourself and Roland conspiring together to investigate the crime like a pair of amateur detectives? You were thrown together at a time when you were particularly vulnerable.” Her father shook his head in a dismissive way. “Your ball and Henry’s passing were both only a week ago.”

Clara clinked the delicate porcelain cup against the saucer as her hand shook. It was Saturday, exactly one week to the day since her life changed forever. It was a fair question, and one that had crossed her mind several times in the first few days, but not recently.

“I know my own mind, Father, and my heart.” She decided to at least make a pretense of eating and spread a slice of toast with butter and jam.

“You are one of the most eligible young women in Philadelphia. Roland is not the best choice—“

“He is *my* choice, Father.”

They glared at one another for a few moments. Her father returned to perusing his paper and Clara stared at the tablecloth until Evans knocked and let them know that he had seated Roland in the office.

Clara narrowed her eyes at her father. He had done that deliberately to try and put Roland off guard. The office was large and more intimidating than the sitting room. She rose when he did and followed him from the dining room.

“Where do you think you are going?” He snapped at her when he realized she was following him to the office.

“If you think that I am going to let you negotiate another marriage arrangement without my input then you must think me both foolish

and naïve. I have no intention of letting you interrogate Roland as if he were our enemy rather than the man I wish to marry.”

He rubbed his hand across his forehead. “This is most irregular.”

She touched his forearm and lifted her brows. “So is having one’s almost fiancé murdered in one’s own home.”

After several seconds, he nodded and tucked his arm around hers.

Roland stood as soon as they entered the office and clasped his hands behind him. “Sir, my father wishes me to inform you that he is satisfied with his findings and is on his way to speak with Chief O’Connell.”

“Be seated, Roland.” Clara’s father settled himself behind the magnificent, flame mahogany, lion’s head double desk that he had imported from England many years ago.

Clara sat in one of the visitor’s chairs opposite her father and gestured for Roland to occupy the chair next to her. For a few seconds they sat in silence and Clara gazed around the room she had lovingly decorated for her father three years ago. Neither the soft off-white walls, nor the olive green draperies that matched the tooled leather insert on top of the desk, nor the crystal chandelier or large landscape on the wall behind the desk did anything to reduce a sense of unease that niggled at her.

Roland cleared his throat as he rubbed at the back of his neck. “I realize that Clara’s declaration followed by my own yesterday may have been a shock. I fear that you see this as an unexpected and unwanted development following our many years of friendship.”

“I am less shocked and more perturbed.”

Clara reached for Roland’s hand and gave his fingers a light squeeze.

He squeezed back but kept his open, honest gaze on her father. “Please tell me what agitates you and I will do my best to allay your nerves.”

Her father poured three glasses of sherry from the decanter behind his desk. “Let’s get down to business. I don’t like your father’s choice of occupation, I’m not persuaded you are able to suitably support my daughter, and I’m not convinced this sudden urge to marry is anything other than the result of your foolish escapades this past week.”

Butterflies swarmed in the empty pit of Clara’s stomach. She wanted so much to jump in and answer all of those questions, but she could

not. Her father would not respect Roland if he couldn't face him.

"I can allay your fears on all three counts." Roland took one of the proffered glasses with a nod of thanks, confidence radiating in every move and word. "My father is first and foremost a plantation owner. His sugar plantations in the Caribbean are extremely profitable and he has recently purchased two plantations in Hawaii.

He enjoys dabbling in detective work, but as a hobby rather than his source of wealth. I don't believe his hobby should be any more sniffed at than stamp collecting, orchid growing or beekeeping. As to my ability to look after Clara, in addition to inheriting the plantations, I expect to forge a successful career in law and the judiciary. I have spoken with my father, and he will settle forty-thousand dollars on me upon marriage." Roland took a breath and a sip of the sherry.

Clara grinned with pride and hope. It was the same sum that her father had agreed to gift to her as a marriage enticement to Henry Norris. If she could persuade him to do the same for marriage to Roland then between them, that was enough to set up their own household. Although she hoped to persuade Roland to stay at the Penrose Estate after they married. She loved this home, it was more than large enough, and would be hers eventually anyway.

"Finally, I must disagree with you, sir. I am convinced that our shared feelings are anything but sudden. In fact I have always loved Clara. I believe our foolish escapades this past week merely uncovered what has always existed; a profound fondness, deepest trust, and shared values."

Clara could no longer keep quiet. Heat filled her cheeks. "I said exactly the same to Father this morning. Over time, our friendship grew into fondness, which has recently blossomed into love."

Clara's father scratched at his chin. "I am impressed by your reasoning and your presentation, Roland."

Clara shook her head at Roland to tell him to stay quiet. She sat through a long silence with her lips clamped shut. Father needed this time to think. He hated nothing more than to feel browbeaten.

As the seconds dragged on, Clara held her breath and her heart began to pound.

"Sir, if I may, I have a suggestion." Roland glanced at Clara and gave her a slight smile before turning back to her father. "Perhaps you would feel more comfortable approving a courtship for a period of time before announcing an engagement. Give us a chance to ensure

this relationship will work for both families, prior to giving your blessing to our engagement and marriage.”

“I see you are both quite determined.” He rubbed his hand across his face. “Clara’s happiness is important to me.” Her father’s voice trembled. “I approve of a courtship of at least six months, if you can persuade me your fondness for one another is lasting, then I will give your engagement my blessing.”

Roland and Clara grinned at one another.

Clara jumped to her feet, ran to her father and threw her arms around his shoulders. “You have made me the happiest young woman in Philadelphia, and you will soon be convinced how much I love Roland.”

He returned her hug then gazed at Roland. “You will treat my daughter with every courtesy. I expect your behavior to meet the highest standards of propriety.”

“I expected nothing less, sir.” Roland dipped his head.

Clara darted back to his side and gripped his hand. “May we tell Minnie and your mother?”

“Clara.” Her father grumbled a warning.

“I know not to tell anyone else, Father, but Minnie and Mrs. Fisher are family.”

He gestured to the door. “Go on then. Send Evans please, we have accounts to go through.”

Hand in hand Roland and Clara paced along the hallway, her steps lighter than they had been all week. “If your father can persuade Chief O’Connell to drop the investigation, then this morning will become the perfect ending to the worst week ever.”

“I’m sure he will succeed.” Roland tugged her hand under his arm and led her to the foyer.

At the hall stand Clara collected her parasol and gloves, gave Evans the message from her father and he hurried away.

“I will succeed also.” Roland whispered and his breath tickled the back of her neck. “We will be engaged in six months and married soon after.”

“Is this your idea of a proposal, Mr. Roland Hamish Fisher?” She whispered back.

He gazed into her eyes, tucked a few stray hairs behind her ear and wrapped his arms around her. "This is a proposal, Miss Clara Abigail Penrose."

She dropped the parasol as a surge of warmth left her limp in his arms. His grip tightened, he bent her head back against his arm and kissed her. His lips were soft at first, a touch of silk against her mouth. But when she let out a slight moan and kissed him back, he pulled her closer. His mouth became more insistent and he parted her shaking lips. Wild tremors skidded along her nerves. Sensations like nothing she'd ever experienced flooded her chest and she felt their bodies melding into one unit.

She'd wanted a communion in which their lips, with an eloquence transcending words, intermingled so they fused into one united being within two frames. The reality was so much better than she'd imagined.

Arms around his neck, she ruffled her fingers in his hair and pulled him closer. "I accept your proposal."

His smile said everything words could not.

She didn't care about anything other than this moment. Not the servants going about their business, or her father not far away in his office. All she wanted was Roland close; she wanted to feel all of him pressed against her, his chest so close to hers she could feel his heartbeat as strongly as her own.

He had the slightest bit of stubble and it scraped at her skin but she didn't care about that either. This kiss was perfect. Nothing could be better than the wonderful feeling of being in his arms, their lips locked in a sensual dance.

AT THE RAP of the knocker against the door they pulled apart. Breathless and chests heaving, they turned as one to the door. Footsteps sounded, Evans turned the corner and admitted Roland's father and Minnie.

"I have good news." Mr. Fisher passed his hat and gloves to Evans. "Is your father home, Clara?"

"Good news?" Clara's breath hitched and she covered her mouth with her hand.

"Several pieces of good news, in fact. Testing has revealed that toxic

copper salts poisoned your guests. Grace and her friends mixed the dregs of several bottles of absinthe to fill the two bottles they used to spike the punch. Some producers use the salts to enhance the green color.” Mr. Fisher tapped his chin. “They couldn’t have known, of course. No charges will be laid.”

Clara nodded while praying the Chief’s benevolent mood extended to Henry’s murder.

Mr. Fisher squeezed her upper arm. “You can breathe easy. Chief O’Connell has accepted my findings and recommendations.”

Clara tried to say thank you, but words failed her.

“Sir Norris?” Roland gripped Clara’s elbow to steady her.

“With the Chief, myself and Thomas all recommending him, he will be accepted to the club. It’s a good outcome for us all.”

Clara sagged against Roland’s chest. She wanted him to hold her and never let go. To be still in his arms, let the relief sink in and fill every cell in her body until she felt light enough to float away. She barely noticed Evans taking Mr. Fisher to the office, leaving Roland, herself and Minnie in the foyer.

Minnie let out a sad-sounding chuckle. “I deduce from your swollen lips and the proximity of your bodies to one another that you two have something to tell me?”

“We are courting,” Clara and Roland said together.

Minnie kissed them both. But there was no joy in her expression.

“What’s wrong, sis?” Roland drew her into their space.

Clara pulled back and focused on Minnie. Her eyes were wide, red, and underlined with dark rings. She clasped her parasol in shaking hands and pulled it into her chest.

“I’m so glad Father left us alone. Samuel is definitely missing.” Minnie hid her head in her brother’s chest and let out a soft sob. “Grace is frantic with worry. He hasn’t been home and has taken none of his possessions. None of his friends have heard from him. If Father finds out, he will break the engagement. I know he will.”

“It looks like we have another mystery to solve.” Roland whispered over Minnie’s head, but she heard the words and sucked in a breath.

“If you two do any more detecting...” She couldn’t finish the sentence, just shook her head.

“Looking for a rogue fiancé is hardly detecting.” Clara caught Roland’s gaze and gave him a nod before turning back to Minnie. “I promised I would find Samuel for you, and working together, we will.”

The End

CAN’T WAIT to find out if the friends find Samuel and restore him to Minnie’s waiting arms?

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MINNIE ROMANCES A ROGUE

A PHILADELPHIA BELLES NOVEL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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Minnie Romances a Rogue

“

It seems the Stotesbury scion has still not shown himself in public after his shocking failure to attend Miss Clara Penrose's debutante ball. Goodness wasn't that a feast for us gluttonous gossips! But back to Mr. Stotesbury, his normally delightful fiancée hasn't smiled in days. Neither family is talking about him, but you can count on Tillie to bring you the latest news as soon as it is to hand.

Tillie's Tattles, Saturday, July 27, 1884

Minnie's fiancé, Samuel, was still missing. At least, he was missing from her life. She had not heard as much as a whisper from him for over a week and even the most infuriating gossip columnist in Philadelphia knew it.

Minnie wrung her hands as she paced silently through the halls of the Fisher Mansion. If only she could keep a journal like her best friend Clara, maybe she could write all her worries down and remove them from her head. But writing was not her forte, a blank page would just add to the stress that pulled her shoulder blades tight.

Her adored home, so lovingly decorated by her mother, usually wrapped around her like a haven. But not this Saturday morning.

Her gaze flitted from room to room, landing briefly on prized possessions and comforting objects alike, but never settling on one item for long.

She fiddled with her engagement ring, her mouth lifting in a sappy smile. Samuel had picked it out for her on a trip to London. She loved it and adored Samuel for choosing the gorgeous sapphire and diamond ring. Samuel said he chose it because the oval-shaped sapphire reminded him of her eyes and the fourteen sparkling diamonds surrounding it made him think of her smile.

Her smile faded. In the two years of their courtship, he had never promised to take her out then neither arrive on time nor send a message to let her know he could not make it. That is exactly what happened nine days ago.

“For heaven’s sake girl, can you not sit still?” Her mother called out from their small library at the front of the house as Minnie passed the door.

“No Mama, I’m too worried.” She’d told her mother a few details. Not everything about Samuel and his disappearance, but enough for her mother to share her concern.

“Is it Samuel? You still haven’t heard from him?”

“Yes and no.” Minnie flopped into one of the well-padded balloon chairs with a loud sigh.

Mama tutted. “You are acting like a potato farmer’s daughter from Idaho.”

“Have you met many daughters of potato farmers?” Minnie gave her mother a mocking smile.

“You can drop the sarcastic tone with me, young lady.” Mama lowered her reading glasses to fix her steady gaze on Minnie’s face. “I know you are concerned but there is no reason for you to assault the furniture or blow a small gale from your mouth. Darling, why not talk with your father? He will quickly find out why you have not heard from your Samuel.”

Minnie stood again and shook her head. “No, not yet, I can’t. And you must not either. You promised.”

“I will keep my promise. But please think about talking with your father.”

Minnie nodded, though she had no intention of telling him all her fears. In truth, she hesitated to tell him any of the reasons keeping her awake at night. She left the library to continue her pacing in the gardens, out of her mother’s sight and hearing.

When was the last time she felt hungry? Ate a proper meal? She couldn’t remember, though she had developed quite a skill set at cutting and pushing food around her plate. It looked as if she’d eaten, like everyone else at the table. It didn’t fool her too-observant mother. But her brother, Roland, and father—both caught up in the excitement surrounding the murder of Henry Norris at Clara’s Debut Ball a week ago—seemed oblivious.

She had also improved her social skills, not that she had suffered from social ineptitude before this happened, but the current situation needed every bit of poise and deflection she had ever learned. Samuel should have attended several social engagements with her in the last week and she was now adept at creating believable excuses to cover for him.

Everyone thought he was away on business. But she couldn't maintain the façade for much longer. Especially now the murder was solved, and society gossipmongers were already seeking new targets for their vitriol. He'd not been away from her for more than a few days at a time before, and he certainly had never been out of touch with all his friends and his sister Grace for so long.

People were already asking where he was hiding. A few even hinted, with a mix of pity and glee in their eyes, that Samuel had forsaken her. No-one expected her to know where he was all the time, but he'd even missed Clara's Debut Ball.

Minnie attended the ball with Roland—nothing would have stopped her from going to her neighbor's and best friend's ball—but the lack of Samuel on her arm was certainly noticed.

The topic was fodder for gossip for several days! Her stomach churned at some of the things she had overheard.

No matter what, Father could not find out Samuel had apparently disappeared into thin air.

Heavens above, she was pacing the gardens rather like a heroine in a gothic romance novel. She stopped fidgeting her hands, slowed her steps and pretended to admire the scented shrubs adorning the pathway, while she silently encouraged herself.

Her situation might not be ideal, but she was not a damsel in distress. No. She was a modern woman in full health and with a working brain. And a darn fine brain at that! She would find Samuel.

If only she knew where and how to start.

With his legal training and investigative experience, Roland would know what to do, but he was yet to return from the estate next door. What advice would he give her? Knowing Roland, ever the lawyer-in-training, he would assemble the facts, identify issues he needed to deal with, and plan his actions.

Father already complained about Samuel not committing to a wedding date; he worried that her fiancé wasn't prepared to commit to her.

Samuel had proposed nearly eighteen months ago, and at the time there was no financial deterrent to a marriage between them.

Since then, he had lost money in business dealings. He refused to explain what it meant for their future together, but he admitted he was yet to replace the money and sort out his finances.

Samuel gave her parents various reasons to explain his reluctance, but none of them were quite believable. What would Father do if he discovered Samuel found himself in financial difficulties, and even worse, left her riddled with worry by his disappearance?

Minnie shook her head. If Father found out even a hint that Samuel could not care for her, in the manner he deemed appropriate, he would break the engagement faster than he could snap his fingers.

"Drat it!" Minnie jolted to a stop under a large maple tree, clasped her hand over her mouth and glanced around her. Thank goodness, she was alone. If her mother heard her curse she would be in a world of trouble.

How much longer might Roland be? It was a little early for a social visit, but then again, they both still spent as much time with Clara on the Penrose Estate as she did on theirs.

She crossed her fingers and mouthed a prayer that his interview with Clara's father went well. They both deserved every happiness. Hopefully Roland found the courage to present his case fluently and succeed in his quest to have Clara's father agree to courting her. Heaven only knew, it seemed they were the last people on earth to realize they were made for one another. When Clara announced she loved him at dinner last night, Minnie's chest had filled with warmth.

Minnie closed her eyes and focused her memory on the dinner. What had Clara said? The words came back to her in a rush. The emotion Clara poured into them had sent a shiver down her spine. *I need the man I love to support me, as he has since the ball, as he has since we first met almost a lifetime ago.* And Roland had immediately answered, *I return your daughter's feelings without reservation, sir.*

The past week, since Henry's murder, had zipped by so fast the memories were a jumbled blur. Her attention had been drawn as much to Roland and Clara as it had to Samuel. But no longer, now all she could think about was Samuel.

Roland and Clara together had solved Henry's murder. Surely, they could help her find one missing fiancé. If she found Samuel before Father realized what was going on, she could make anything happen.

Yes, she could.

With her chin high and her focus narrowing she strode back to the house, marched to the foyer, and found her gloves, hat, and parasol on the hall stand. She glanced at herself in the mirror and gave herself a nod.

Day one of the new confident and determined Minnie had dawned. Instead of calling for a carriage to take her the short distance to the Penrose Estate she decided to walk.

Minnie tapped on the library door. "I'm going to see Clara, Mama."

"Don't be too long, darling, we have guests for luncheon today."

"I haven't forgotten." Triple darn it, she *had* forgotten.

The luncheon with some of her parent's friends had completely slipped her mind. She glanced at the clock in the library. Only ten o'clock, so she had time to speak with Roland. Maybe Clara too, and could still return home in time to change her gown.

She paced to the Penrose home via the front pathway. Their connecting back gardens made for a more pleasant and private walk, but for the trip today she needed speed. Concentrating on her steps, Minnie failed to notice another person on the pathway. She bumped into the person and released a loud oomph.

Strong arms steadied her shoulders. "Why are you racing along like a drunk skunk?"

"Father." Minnie wriggled from his grip. "I'm sorry, I wasn't watching ___"

"Obviously." He laughed as he shook his head, a good mood written across his face. "Are you heading to the Penrose Estate?"

Minnie nodded and took his proffered arm. "I'm visiting Clara. I'm sure Roland has proposed by now and can't wait to hug them both."

It wasn't too much of a lie. She was sure they had received permission to become engaged, or at the very least to start courting. She felt it in her bones. Happiness for her best friend and her brother only sharpened anxiety for her own engagement, but she pushed the nervous spikes down.

Father accompanied her the rest of the way. He rapped the door knocker, stood back, and whispered. "Be discreet, my dear. The discussion with Mr. Penrose may not have progressed as much as Roland desires."

“Mr. Fisher, Miss Minnie.” Evans, the Penrose butler, opened the door with a nod for her father.

Behind Evans, Clara and Roland stood close together, both rosy-cheeked, breathless and with their chests heaving. Minnie allowed herself to smile even though her father didn’t seem to notice anything amiss.

“Good news.” Mr. Fisher passed his hat and gloves to Evans. “Is your father home, Clara?”

“Good news?” Clara’s breath hitched and she covered her mouth with her hand.

This explained Father’s mood. Minnie held her breath. If Clara was about to hear the final scenes in the story of Henry’s death, and it was good news, then Minnie would take it as a sign that her own endeavors for Samuel would be successful.

“Several pieces of good news, in fact. Testing has revealed toxic copper salts poisoned your guests. Grace Stotesbury and her friends mixed the dregs of several bottles of absinthe to fill the two bottles they used to spike the punch. Some producers use the copper salts to enhance absinthe’s green color, and the salts had settled to the bottom of the bottles making the concentration even higher than usual.” Mr. Fisher tapped his chin. “The girls couldn’t have known of course, no charges will be laid.”

Minnie closed her eyes briefly as a wave of relief filled her chest. Grace—Samuel’s often snooty sister— would not face a police charge. Becoming sick herself was the best punishment, and she had been very sick indeed.

Minnie reached for Clara’s hand and added a prayer that the Chief of Police had extended his benevolent mood to Henry’s murder and to the revelation that it was Clara’s Grandma Beth who accidentally killed Mr. Norris.

Mr. Fisher squeezed Clara’s upper arm. “You can breathe easy. Chief O’Connell has accepted my findings and recommendations.”

Clara trembled at Roland’s side. She opened and closed her mouth as if trying to speak but words failed her.

“Sir Norris?” Roland snaked his arm around Clara’s waist.

“With the Chief, myself and Thomas all recommending him, he will be accepted to the Philadelphia Club as he has wished for some time. It’s a good outcome for us all.” Father turned to the butler. “Is Mr.

Penrose in his office?"

"He is and I will take you there at once." Neither Evans' polite expression nor his deferential demeanor showed any change, but Minnie could have sworn she saw a flash of relief in his eyes at the good news.

The two older men left, leaving Roland, herself, and Clara in the foyer.

Minnie let out a sad-sounding chuckle. "I deduce from your swollen lips, and the proximity of your bodies to one another, you two have something to tell me?"

"We are courting," Clara and Roland said together. Happiness bubbled out in their tone and huge grins.

"And the news from your father has made this day perfect." Clara wiped away a tear.

Minnie kissed them both. But she couldn't force real joy into her expression.

"What's wrong, sis?" Roland drew her into their space.

Clara pulled back and focused on Minnie. Minnie lowered her gaze, clasped the parasol in shaking hands and pulled it into her chest. Clara gripped Minnie's hand. "My sweet girl, tell me what is wrong, is it Samuel?"

Clara continued her scrutiny, no doubt taking in Minnie's red, puffy eyes underlined with dark rings.

"I'm so glad father left us alone. Samuel." Minnie hid her head in her brother's chest and let out a soft sob. "Grace is frantic with worry. He has not returned home, is not in his townhouse and has taken none of his possessions. None of his friends have heard from him. I fear he has serious financial issues. Perhaps he is hiding from creditors. If Father finds out, he will break the engagement. I know he will."

"It looks like we have another mystery to solve," Roland whispered over Minnie's head, but she heard the words and sucked in a breath. She had wanted advice from Roland and Clara, not more detective work.

"If you two poke into anything else..." She couldn't finish the sentence, just shook her head. As if the two of them hadn't landed in enough trouble with all the investigating they pursued in the past week.

“Looking for a rogue fiancé is hardly detecting.” Clara caught Roland’s gaze and gave him a nod before turning back to Minnie. “I promised I would find Samuel for you, and working together we will.” She glanced around and lowered her voice. “It is not terribly private here; let’s go to the sitting room so we can plot our strategy.”

Minnie straightened her spine. They *would* find him.

Whether he wanted to be tracked down or not.

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About the Author



Kim is a USA Today Bestselling Author of Urban Fantasy, Paranormal and Historical Romance. A precocious reader and storyteller from age four. Now, she writes about hope and determination and about strong women making their own choices. Whether it's urban fantasy, or paranormal or historical suspense, every story is threaded through with magical romance.

When not writing, or researching, Kim enjoys paper-crafting, gardening, playing with her mischievous dog, chatting on social media, and catching up with friends. She is a certified chocoholic.

Kim grew up in Birmingham, UK. She studied medieval history and psychology in Australia and now lives with her husband and dog in Melbourne, Australia.

